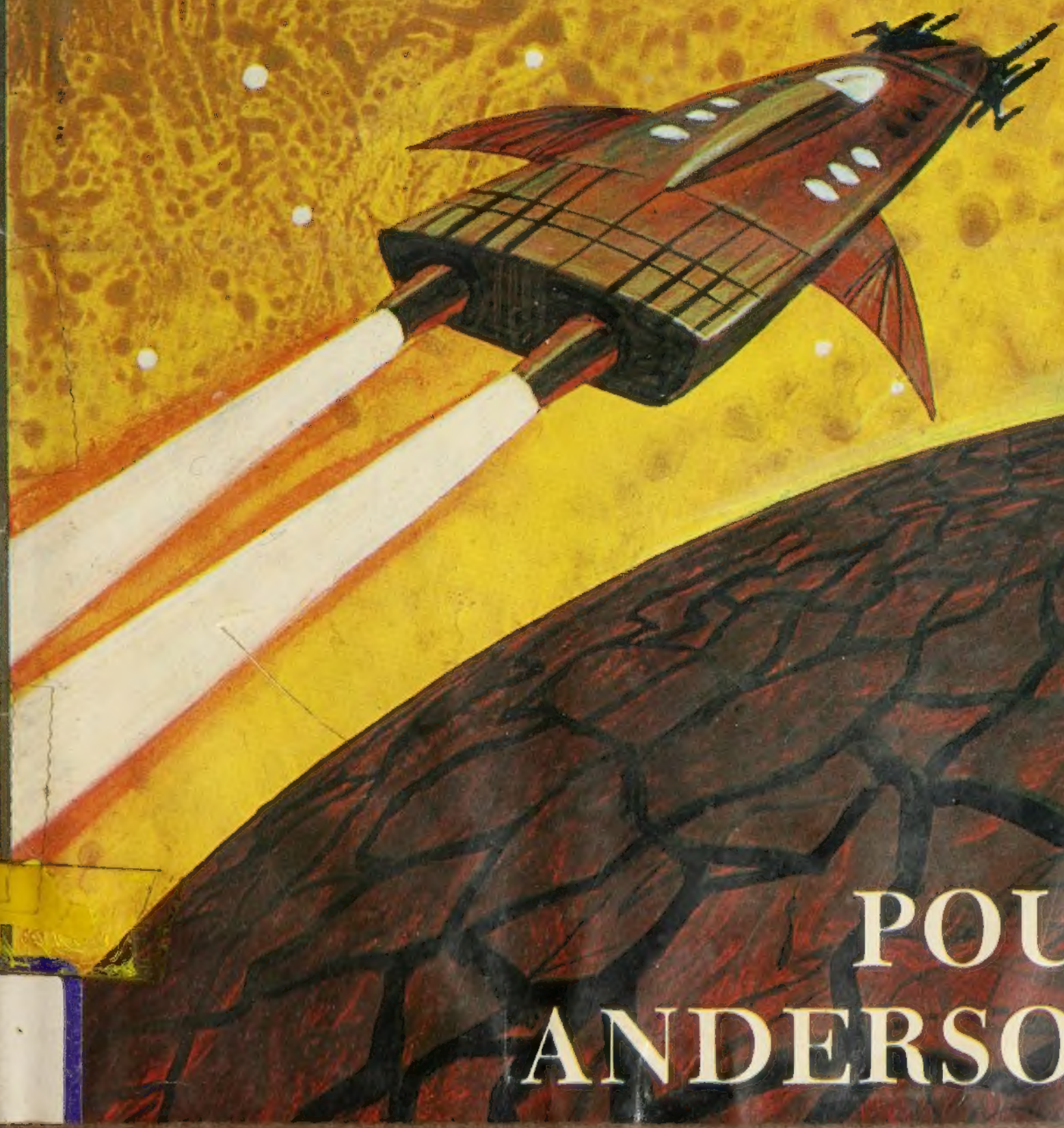
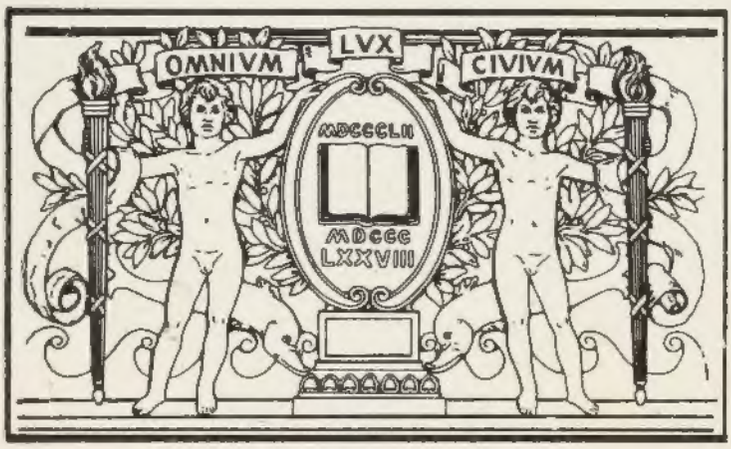
The Night Face and Other Stories



POUL ANDERSON

The Night Face and Other Stories is an exclusive Gregg collection that brings together for the first time the short novel and three stories set in the post-Empire era of Poul Anderson's Technic Civilization Series. Set on the planet Gwydion in the fourth millenium A.D., *The Night Face* concerns the conflicts and dislocations that develop when an outpost planet is contacted again after 1000 years of isolation. In "A Tragedy of Errors" a trader discovers that the connotations of his language are drastically and dangerously different on a distant planet. "The Sharing of Flesh" is a tragic exploration of the cultural and moral dimensions of cannibalism against a background of grief and revenge. And "Starfog" is a fascinating adventure in unexplored deep space.

The Night Face and Other Stories is the first volume in **The Worlds of Poul Anderson,** a seven-volume collection of five novels and 19 stories by one of the giants of science fiction. This exclusive collection includes an informative introduction by the author.



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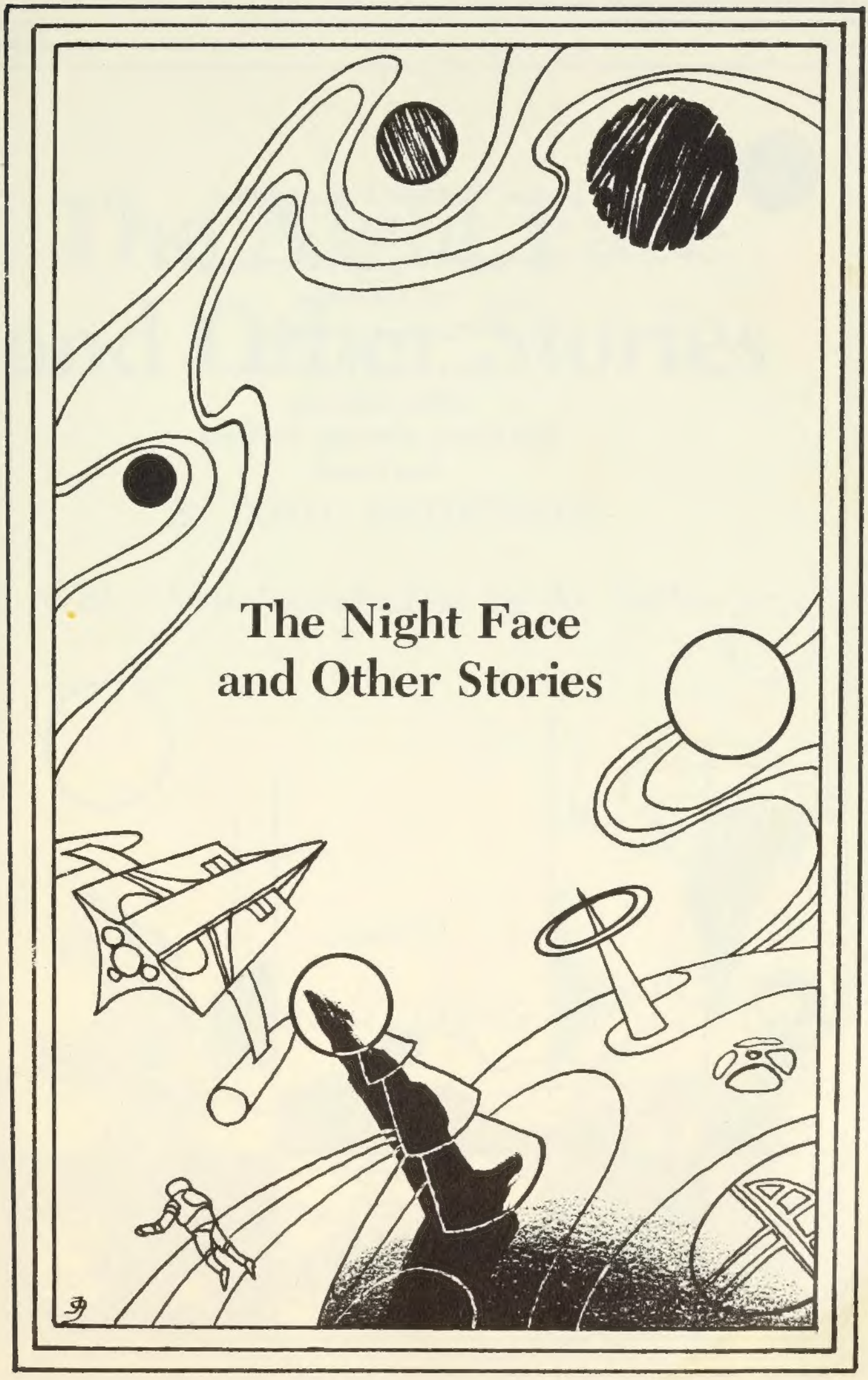
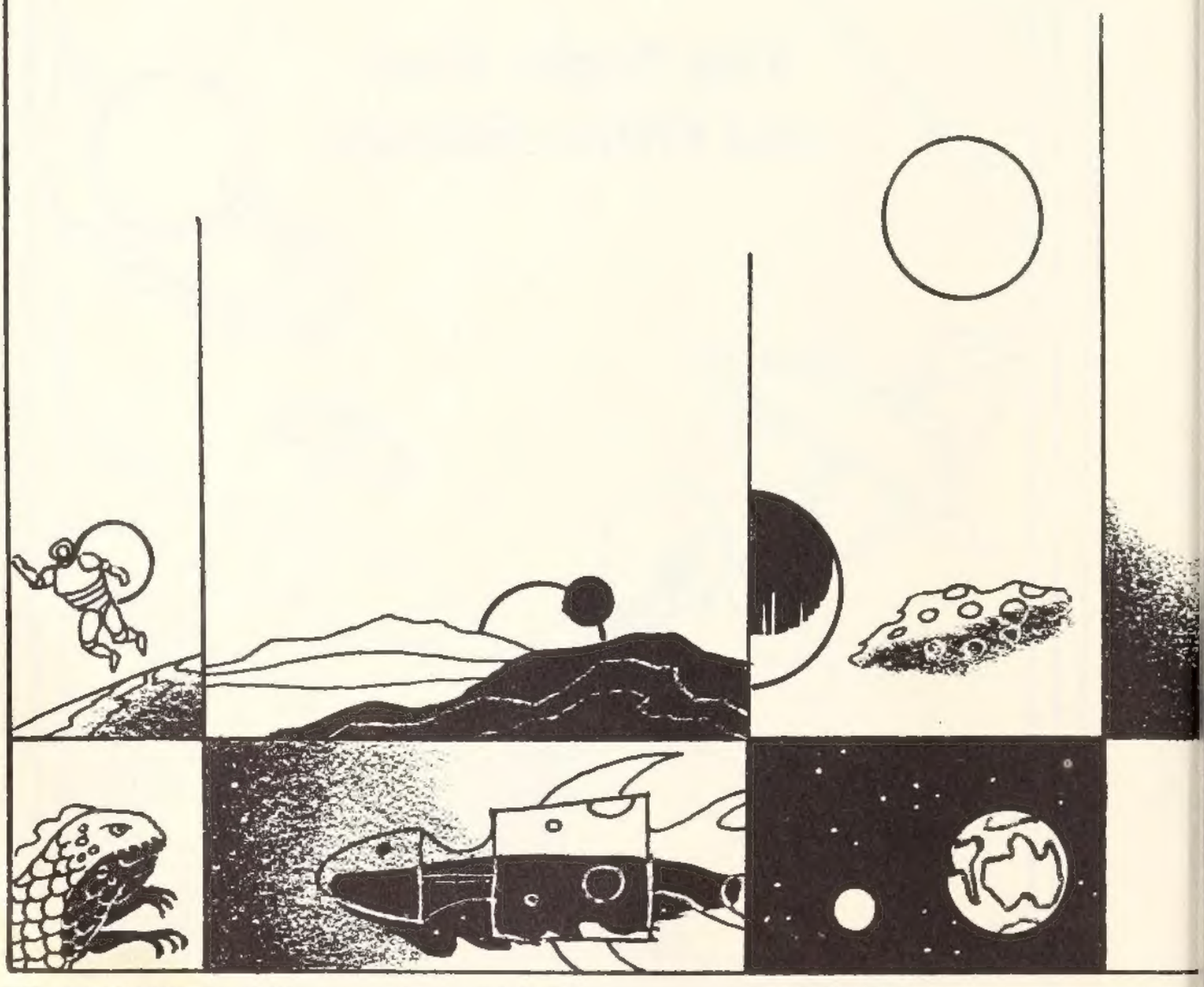


The Night Face and Other Stories

The Worlds of Poul Anderson

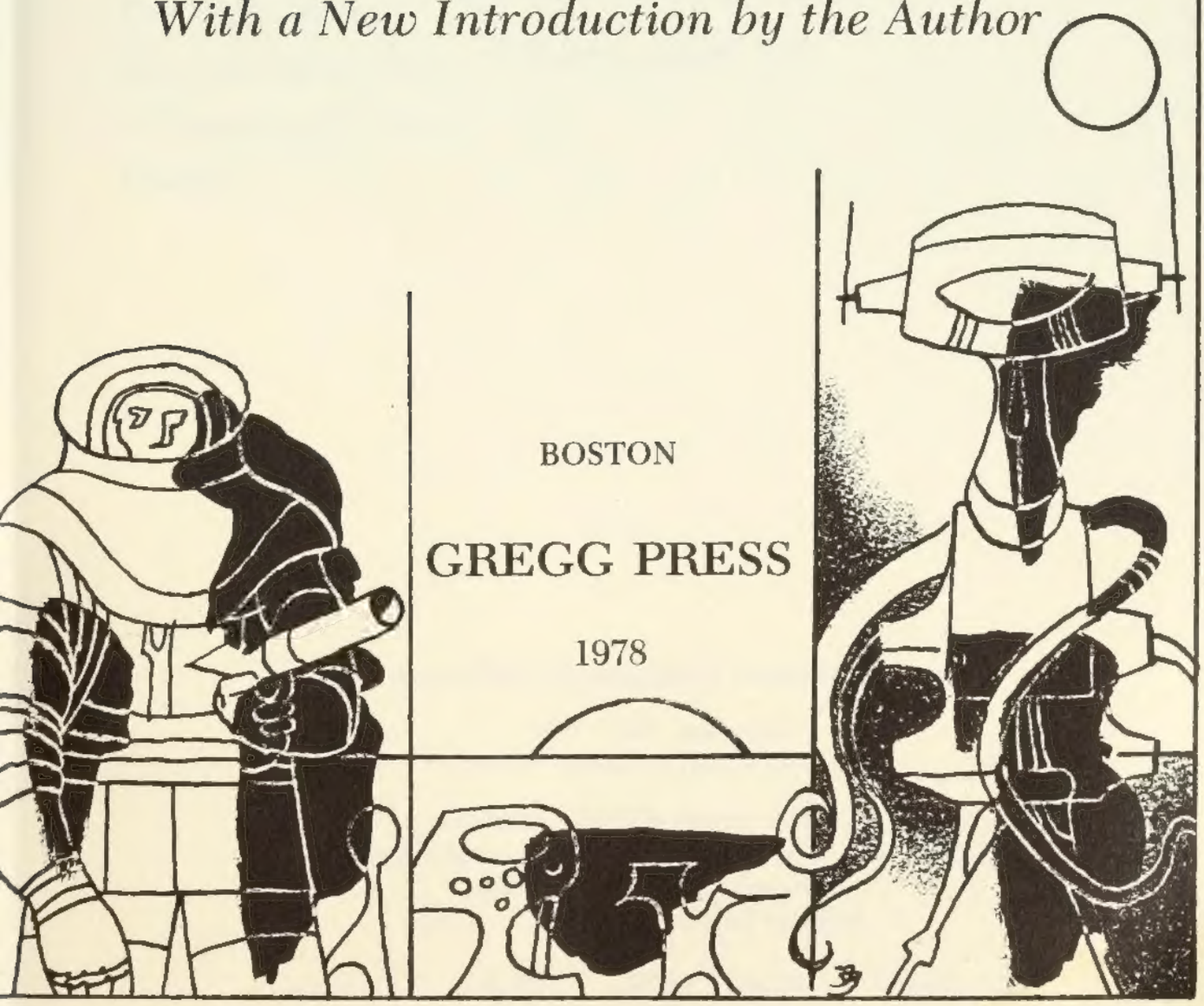
The Night Face and Other Stories
The Byworlder
The Horn of Time
The Long Way Home
Orbit Unlimited
The Queen of Air and Darkness
Two Worlds



The Night Face and Other Stories

By POUL ANDERSON

With a New Introduction by the Author



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GREGG PRESS

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Introduction

HERE ARE FOUR TALES that belong to that "future history" on which I have been working, off and on, for many years, and which by now numbers a round forty separate items, ranging from short stories to novels.

To the best of my knowledge, Robert A. Heinlein introduced the "future history" method into science fiction. For a long time, everything he published under his own name fitted into a common scheme of events that ranged from the present day onward for several centuries. While each story could be read by itself, the cross references gave extra depth and meaning to all, thus extra enjoyment. The whole became greater than the sum of the parts.

He acquired several imitators, including myself. My first such series I eventually abandoned, as he eventually abandoned his, because time caught up with both. That which we described in fiction failed to become reality. (Just the same, after long hiatuses we've done at least one revival apiece.) I don't believe Heinlein has started a new chronology. On the whole, his subsequent works appear to be independent of each other.

I didn't intend to begin afresh, either. I was simply writing about two distinct characters: Nicholas van Rijn in a lusty pioneering era of star travel, Dominic Flandry in the twilight of an empire. Then once, while I was composing a narrative about the latter, it occurred to me that the former could well have lived generations earlier, and might have become a folk hero on some planets—and perhaps a folk villain on others. Impulsively, I put in a mention of that, and was hooked.

It seemed that a few more yarns already printed could fit in too. Afterward, whenever an idea came along for a plot that might conform likewise, I made it do so, on the basis of "Why not?"

Unexpectedly fast, this grew into a rather large beast to have by the tail. If I was not to be dragged off into a welter of inconsistencies, I

needed to keep exhaustive notes. Still more did I need a real, overall pattern. What I was trying to chronicle was nothing less than the rise and fall of a civilization, its myriad interactions with alien societies, and the evolution of its successors. Today those notes overflow a large looseleaf binder. They include charts, drawings, and a long commentary on the whole course of events. For many thoughts about that, I am indebted to John K. Hord and his monumental, still unpublished but ongoing study of growth and decay in all the real civilizations Earth has yet known.

This is not the place to go into detail. Sandra Miesel has done that elsewhere, most excellently.* Besides, thus far the stories in the present volume remain somewhat peripheral. They have no very clear ties to the rest.

That is because they take place well after the collapse of the Terran Empire and well away from the region it dominated. New societies, sometimes whole new human races are arising in their various isolations. Though the capability of visiting the mother planet and learning what has happened may exist, the practical possibility does not. The people in *The Night Face*, "A Tragedy of Errors," and "The Sharing of Flesh" are too busy surviving and rebuilding, with too few resources to spare for anything else. The people in "Starfog," which is set at a far later date, are better off, but they are simply too distant and, because of all the time and history which have passed, not really interested. They've plenty to engage their attention closer to home.

I know of no precise analogies in the actual past. Post-Roman Britain may have provided a case for a while, but contact with the Mediterranean countries resumed within less than two centuries, and was probably never broken if we count venturesome individuals. The Norse colony in Greenland might have developed along its own lines after the ships stopped coming from Europe, but it died out, and besides, presently the ships were back.

Still, instances like these suggest possibilities. If we learn how to travel faster than light—a mighty big if, but not unthinkable—the sheer scale of interstellar space, the sheer number of stars, will create an altogether different situation from any that can be on a single planet. While my scheme does assume that certain classes of events which have been common in the past will repeat themselves in the future—this may be another enormous if—the variations of detail are countless, and at last become overwhelming. The Roman Empire bore abundant resemblances to the Egyptian, Persian, Han, and others, but it was not identical with any of them, and its existence had

unique, irreversible consequences which finally touched all mankind. I feel sure that, whatever the repetitions in it, the future will bring forth fresh mutations, for better or worse or both. At last, if our species survives, it will move on into a wholly divergent, therefore unforeseeable phase of history.

That time may be closer than we realize, or it may be remote. Nobody can say. All I do is tell stories.

I don't even know how much more I will be adding to this series. It's getting harder and harder to stay self-consistent—in several matters, already impossible, science having changed our picture of the universe so greatly in the past couple of decades. Anyway, there are all sorts of fascinating unrelated things to try. Yet, if and when I end the "history," it will be with pleasant memories, many of which are due to the kindness of readers who have expressed interest. Hail and farewell! Thank you!

POUL ANDERSON

*See her introduction to *War of the Wing-Men* (Boston: Gregg Press, 1976), pp. xi-xx. Her chart of the Technic Civilization Series is reprinted here following this introduction.

Poul Anderson's Technic Civilization Series

[This chart, compiled by Sandra Miesel, differs in certain details from the order of the more detailed chart compiled by David Stever in *The Collector's Poul Anderson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Paratime Press, 1976), which also includes a short essay summarizing the events and characters in the series. The arrangement of stories and books in this chart is according to their apparent internal chronology, which covers a period of about 800 years beginning in the 23rd century A.D., from the early extrasolar period to the beginning of the Long Night, and extending to somewhere between the 35th and the 72nd centuries. Anderson's series is far from completed, with many works still to come. Although Anderson has aided in the preparation of this chart, he has not necessarily committed himself to this precise chronology. As presented below, this chart is intended as a guide to a significant portion of Anderson's published work to date. *David G. Hartwell*]. Copyright © 1976 by G. K. Hall & Co.

The Near Future: (stories yet to be written)

The Early Extrasolar Period:

"Wings of Victory," *Analog Science Fiction* (cited as *ASF*), April, 1972.

"The Problem of Pain," *Fantasy and Science Fiction* (cited as *F&SF*), February, 1973.

THE BREAKUP

The Era of Polesotechnic League:

early: (stories yet to be written)

late: "Margin of Profit" *ASF*, September, 1956 (included in *Trader to the Stars*, below).

War of the Wing-Men. Ace Books, 1958 (as "The Man Who Counts," *ASF*, February-April, 1958).

Trader to the Stars. Doubleday, 1964 (includes: "Hiding

Place," *ASF*, March, 1961; "Territory," *ASF*, June, 1963; "The Master Key," *ASF*, July, 1964).

The Trouble Twisters. Doubleday, 1966 (contains: "The Three-Cornered Wheel," *ASF*, October, 1963; "A Sun Invisible," *ASF*, April, 1966; "The Trouble Twisters," published as "Trader Team," *ASF*, July-August, 1965).

"Day of Burning," published as "Supernova," *ASF*, January, 1967.

"How to Be Ethnic in One Easy Lesson," in *Future Quest*, ed. Roger Elwood, Avon Books, 1974.

Satan's World. Doubleday, 1969, and *ASF*, May-August, 1968.

"Lodestar," in *Astounding: The John W. Campbell Memorial Anthology*, ed. Harry Harrison, Random House, 1973.

"Birthright," *ASF*, February, 1970.

[sequel to *War of the Wing-Men*, in preparation]

"A Little Knowledge," *ASF*, August, 1971.

"The Season of Forgiveness," *Boy's Life*, December, 1973.

The Time of Troubles:

"Rescue on Avalon," *Boy's Life*, July, 1973.

"Wingless on Avalon," in *Children of Infinity*, ed. Roger Elwood, Franklin Watts, 1973.

The Era of the Terran Empire:

early "The Star Plunderer," *Planet Stories* (cited as *PS*), September, 1952.

"Sargasso of Lost Starships," *PS*, January, 1952.

The People of the Wind. New American Library, 1973, and *ASF*, February-April, 1973.

late: *Ensign Flandry.* Chilton, 1966. Abridged version in *Amazing* (cited as *Amz*), October, 1966.

"Outpost of Empire," *Galaxy* (cited as *Gal*), December, 1967.

A Circus of Hells. New American Library, 1970 (incorporates "The White King's War," *Gal*, October, 1969.)

The Rebel Worlds. New American Library, 1969.

The Day of Their Return. Doubleday, 1973.

Agent of the Terran Empire. Chilton, 1965 (contains:

"Tiger by the Tail," *PS*, January, 1951; "Warriors from Nowhere," published as "Ambassadors of Flesh," *PS*, Summer, 1954; "Honorable Enemies," *Future Combined With Science Fiction Stories*, May, 1951; "Hunters of the Sky Cave," published as *We Claim These Stars!*, Ace, 1959, from abridged version, "A Handful of Stars," *Amz*, June, 1959).

Flandry of Terra. Chilton, 1965 (contains: "The Game of Glory," Venture, March, 1958; "A Message in Secret," published as *Mayday Orbit*, Ace, 1961, from shorter version in *Fantastic*, December, 1959; "A Plague of Masters," *Fantastic*, December, 1960-January, 1961, and published as *Earthman, Go Home!*, Ace, 1961).

A Knight of Ghosts and Shadows. New American Library, 1975, and *Gal*, September/October-November/December, 1974.

THE LONG NIGHT

The Post-Empire Era:

"A Tragedy of Errors," *Gal*, February, 1968.

Let the Spacemen Beware! Ace, 1963 (shorter version published as "A Twelvemonth and a Day," *Fantastic Universe*, January, 1960).

"The Sharing of Flesh," *Gal*, December, 1968.

"Starfog," *ASF*, August, 1967.

The Night Face

I

THE *Quetzal* did not leave orbit and swing toward the planet until she got an all-clear from the boat which had gone ahead to make arrangements. Even then her approach was cautious, as was fitting in a region as little known as this. Miguel Tolteca expected he would have a couple of hours free to watch the scenery unfold.

He was not exactly a sybarite, but he liked to do things in style. First he dialed PRIVACY on his stateroom door, lest some friendly soul barge in to pass the time of day. Then he put Castellani's *Symphony No. 2 in D Minor* with Subsonics on the tapester, mixed himself a rum and conchoru, converted the bunk to a lounger, and sat back with his free hand on the controls of the exterior scanner. Its screen grew black and full of wintry unwinking stars. He searched in a clockwise direction until Gwydion swam into view, a tiny disc upon darkness, the clearest blue he had ever seen.

The door chimed. "Oa," called Tolteca through the comunit, irritated, "can you not read?"

"My mistake," said the voice of Raven. "I thought you were the chief of the expedition."

Tolteca swore, folded the lounger into a chair, and stepped across the little room. A slight, momentary change in weight informed him that the *Quetzal* had put on a spurt of extra acceleration. Doubtless to dodge some meteorite swarm, the engineer part of him thought. They'd be more common here than around Nuevamerica, this being a newer system. . . . Otherwise the pseudogee field held firm. The spaceship was a precision instrument.

He opened the door. "Very well, Commandant." He pronounced the hereditary title with a curtness that approached insult. "What is so urgent?"

Raven stood still for an instant, observing him. Tolteca was a young man, middling tall, with wide, stiffly held shoulders. His face was thin and sharp, under brown hair drawn back into the short queue customary on his planet, and the eyes were levelly aimed. However much the United Republics of Nuevamerica made of their shiny new democracy, it meant something to stem from one of their old professional families. He wore the uniform of the Argo Astrographical Company, but that was only a simple, pleasing version of his people's everyday garb: blue tunic, gray culottes, white stockings, and no insignia.

Raven came in and closed the door. "By chance," he said, his tone mild again, "one of my men overheard some of yours dicing to settle who should debark first after you and the ship's captain."

"Well, that sounds harmless enough," said Tolteca sarcastically. "Do you expect us to observe any official pecking order?"

"No. What—um—puzzled me was, nobody mentioned my own detachment."

Tolteca raised his brows. "You wanted your men to sit in on the dice game?"

"According to what my soldier reported to me, there seems to be no doctrine for planetfall and afterward."

"Well," said Tolteca, "as a simple courtesy to our hosts, Captain Utiel and I—and you, if you wish—will go out first to greet them. There's to be quite a welcoming committee, we're told. But beyond that, good ylem, Commandant, what difference does it make who comes down the gangway in what order?"

Raven fell motionless again. It was the common habit of Lochlanna aristocrats. They didn't stiffen at critical instants. They rarely showed any physical rigidity; but their muscles seemed to go loose and their eyes glazed over with calculation. Tolteca sometimes thought that that alone made them so alien that the Namerican Revolution had always been inevitable.

Finally—thirty seconds later, but it seemed longer—Raven said, "I can see how this misunderstanding occurred, Sir Engineer. Your people have developed several unique institutions in the fifty years since gaining independence, and have forgotten some of our customs. Certainly the concept of exploration, even treaty-making, as a strictly private, commercial enterprise, is not Lochlanna. We have been making unconscious assumptions about each other. The fact that our two groups have kept so much apart on this voyage has helped maintain those errors. I offer apology."

It was not relevant, but Tolteca was driven to snap, "Why should you apologize to me? I'm doubtless also to blame."

Raven smiled. "But I am a Commandant of the Oakenshaw Ethnos."

As if that bland purr had attracted him, a cat stuck his head out of the Lochlanna's flowing surcoat sleeve. Zio was a Siamese tom, big, powerful, and possessed of a temper like mercury fulminate. His eyes were cold blue in the brown mask. "Mneowrr," he said remindingly. Raven scratched him under the chin. Zio tilted back his head and raced his motor.

Tolteca gulped down an angry retort. Let the fellow have his superiority complex. He struck a cigarette and smoked in short hard puffs. "Never mind that," he said. "What's the immediate problem?"

"You must correct the wrong impression among your men. My troop goes out first."

"What? If you think—"

"In combat order. The spacemen will stand by to lift ship if anything goes awry. When I signal, you and Captain Utiel may emerge and make your speeches. But not before."

For a space Tolteca could find no words. He could only stare.

Raven watied, impassive. He had the Lochlanna build, the result of many generations on a planet with one-fourth again the standard surface gravity. Though tall for one of his own race, he was barely of average Namerican height. Thick-boned and thick-muscled, he moved like his cat, a gait which had always appeared slippery and sneaking to Tolteca's folk. His head was typically long, with the expected disharmony of broad face, high cheekbones, hook nose, sallow skin which looked youthful because genetic drift had eliminated the beard. His hair, close cropped, was a cap of midnight, and his brows met above the narrow green eyes. His clothes were not precisely gaudy, but the republican simplicity of Nuevamerica found them barbaric—high-collared blouse, baggy blue trousers tucked into soft half boots, surcoat embroidered with twined snakes and flowers, a silver dragon brooch. Even aboard ship, Raven wore dagger and pistol.

"By all creation," whispered Tolteca at last. "Do you think we're on one of your stinking campaigns of conquest?"

"Routine precautions," said Raven.

"But, the first expedition here was welcomed like—like—Our own advance boat, the pilot, he was feted till he could hardly stagger back aboard!"

Raven shrugged, earning an indignant look from Zio. "They've had almost one standard year to think over what the first expedition told them. We're a long way from home in space, and even longer in time. It's been twelve hundred years since the breakup of the Commonwealth isolated them. The whole Empire rose and fell while they were alone on that one planet. Genetic and cultural evolution have done strange work in shorter periods."

Tolteca dragged on his cigarette and said roughly, "Judging by the data, those people think more like Namericans than you do."

"Indeed?"

"They have no armed forces. No police, even, in the usual sense; public service monitors is the best translation of their word. No—well, one thing we have to find out is the extent to which they do have a government. The first expedition had too much else to learn, to establish that clearly. But beyond doubt, they haven't got much."

"Is this good?"

"By my standards, yes. Read our Constitution."

"I have done so. A noble document, for your planet." Raven paused, scowling. "If this Gwydion were remotely like any other lost colony I've ever heard of, there would be small reason for worry. Common sense alone, the knowledge that overwhelming power exists to avenge any treachery toward us, would stay them. But don't you see, when there is no evidence of internecine strife, even of crime—and yet they are obviously not simple children of nature—I can't guess what *their* common sense is like."

"I can," clipped Tolteca, "and if your bully boys swagger down the gangway first, aiming guns at people with flowers in their hands, I know what that common sense will think of us."

Raven's smile was oddly charming on that gash of a mouth. "Credit me with some tact. We will make a ceremony of it."

"Looking ridiculous at best—they don't wear uniforms on Gwydion—and transparent at worst—for they're no fools. Your suggestion is declined."

"But I assure you—"

"No, I said. Your men will debark individually, and unarmed."

Raven sighed. "As long as we are exchanging reading lists, Sir Engineer, may I recommend the articles of the expedition to you?"

"What are you hinting at now?"

"The *Quetzal*," said Raven patiently, "is bound for Gwydion to investigate certain possibilities and, if they look hopeful, to open negotiations with the folk. Admittedly you are in charge of that. But

for obvious reasons of safety, Captain Utiel has the last word while we are in space. What you seem to have forgotten is that once we have made planetfall, a similar power becomes mine."

"Oa! If you think you can sabotage—"

"Not at all. Like Captain Utiel, I must answer for my actions at home, if you should make any complaint. However, no Lochlanna officer would assume my responsibility if he were not given corresponding authority."

Tolteca nodded, feeling sick. He remembered now. It hadn't hitherto seemed important. The Company's operations took men and valuable ships ever deeper into this galactic sector, places where humans had seldom or never been even at the height of the empire. The hazards were unpredictable, and an armed guard on every vessel was in itself a good idea. But then a few old women in culottes, on the Policy Board, decided that plain Namericans weren't good enough. The guard had to be soldiers born and bred. In these days of spreading peace, more and more Lochlanna units found themselves at loose ends and hired out to foreigners. They kept pretty much aloof, on ship and in camp, and so far it hadn't worked out badly. But the *Quetzal* . . .

"If nothing else," said Raven, "I have my own men to think of, and their families at home."

"But not the future of interstellar relations?"

"If those can be jeopardized so easily, they don't seem worth caring about. My orders stand. Please instruct your men accordingly."

Raven bowed. The cat slid from his nesting place, dug claws in the coat, and sprang up on the man's shoulder. Tolteca could have sworn that the animal sneered. The door closed behind them.

Tolteca stood immobile for a while. The music reached a crescendo, reminding him that he had wanted to enjoy approach. He glanced back at the screen. The ship's curving path had brought the sun Ynis into scanner view. Its radiance stopped down by the compensator circuits, it spread corona and great wings of zodiacal light like nacre across the stars. The prominences must also be spectacular, for it was an F8 with a mass of about two Sols and a corresponing luminosity of almost fourteen. But at its distance, 3.7 Astronomical Units, only the disc of the photosphere could be seen, covering a bare ten minutes of arc. All in all, a most ordinary main sequence star. Tolteca twisted dials until he found Gwydion again.

The planet had gained apparent size, though he still saw it as little more than a chipped turquoise coin. The cloud bands and aurora

should soon become visible. No continents, however. While the first expedition had reported Gwydion to be terrestroid in astonishing detail, it was about ten percent smaller and denser than Old Earth—to be expected of a younger world, formed when there were more heavy atoms in the universe—and thus possessed less total land area. What there was was divided into islands and archipelagos. Broad shallow oceans made the climate mild from pole to pole. Here came its moon, 1600 kilometers in diameter, 96,300 kilometers in orbital radius, swinging from behind the disc like a tiny hurried firefly.

Tolteca considered the backdrop of the scene with a sense of eeriness. This close, the Nebula's immense cloud of dust and gas showed only as a region where stars were fewer and paler than elsewhere. Even nearby Rho Ophiuchi was blurred. Sol, of course, was hidden from telescopes as well as from eyes, an insignificant yellow dwarf two hundred parsecs beyond that veil, which its light would never pierce. *I wonder what's happening there,* thought Tolteca. *It's long since we had any word from Old Earth.*

He recollected what Raven had ordered, and cursed.

II

THE PASTURE where the *Quetzal* had been asked to settle her giant cylinder was about five kilometers south of the town called Instar.

From the gangway Tolteca had looked widely across rolling fields. Hedges divided them into meadows of intense blossom-flecked green; plowlands where the first delicate shoots of grain went like a breath across brown furrows; orchards and copses and scattered outbuildings made toylike by distance. The River Camlot gleamed between trees which might almost have been poplars. Instar bestrode it, red tile roofs above flower gardens around which the houses were built.

Most roads across that landscape were paved, but narrow and leisurely winding. Sometimes, Tolteca felt sure, a detour had been made to preserve an ancient tree or the lovely upswelling of a hill. Eastward the ground flattened, sloping down to a dike that cut off his view of the sea. Westward it climbed, until forested hills rose abruptly on the horizon. Beyond them could be seen mountain

peaks, some of which looked volcanic. The sun hung just above their snows. You didn't notice how small it was in the sky, for it radiated too brightly to look at and the total illumination was almost exactly one standard sol. Cumulus clouds loomed in the southwest, and a low cool wind ruffled the puddles left by a recent shower.

Tolteca leaned back on the seat of the open car. "This is more beautiful than the finest places on my own world," he said to Dawyd. "And yet Nuevamerica is considered extremely Earthlike."

"Thank you," replied the Gwydiona. "Though we can take little credit. The planet was here, with its intrinsic conditions, its native biochemistry and ecology, all eminently suited to human life. I understand that God wears a different face in most of the known cosmos."

"Uh—" Tolteca hesitated. The local language, as recorded by the first expedition and learned by the second before starting out, was not altogether easy for him. Like Lochlanna, it derived from Anglic, whereas the Namericans had always spoken Ispanyo. Had he quite understood that business with "God"? Somehow, it didn't sound conventionally religious. But then, the secular orientation of his own culture made him liable to misinterpret theological references.

"Yes," he said presently. "The variations in so-called terrestroid planets are not great from a percentage standpoint, but to human beings they make a tremendous difference. On one continent of my own world, for example, settlement was impossible until a certain common genus of plant had been eradicated. It was harmless most of the year, but the pollen it broadcast in spring happened to contain a substance akin to botulinus toxin."

Dawyd gave him a startled look. Tolteca wondered what he had said wrong. Had he misused some local word? Of course, he'd had to employ the Ispanyo name of the poison. . . . "Eradicate?" murmured Dawyd. "Do you mean destroyed? Entirely?" Catching himself, slipping back into his serene manner with what looked like practiced ease, he said, "Well, let us not discuss technicalities right away. It was doubtless one of the Night Faces." He took his hand from the steering rod long enough to trace a sign in the air.

Tolteca felt a trifle puzzled. The first expedition had emphasized in its reports that the Gwydiona were not superstitious, though they had a vast amount of ceremony and symbolism. To be sure, the first expedition had landed on a different island; but it had found the same culture everywhere that it visited. (And it had failed to understand why men occupied only the region between latitudes 25 and 70 degrees north, although many other spots looked equally pleasant.

There had been so much else to learn.) When the *Quetzal's* advance boat arrived, Instar had been suggested as the best landing site merely because it was one of the larger towns and possessed a college with an excellent reference library.

The ceremonies of welcome hadn't been overwhelming, either. The whole of Instar had turned out—men, women, and children with garlands, pipes, and lyres. There had been no few visitors from other areas; still, the crowd wasn't as big as would have been the case on many planets. After the formal speeches, music was played in honor of the newcomers and a ballet was presented, a thing of masks and thin costumes whose meaning escaped Tolteca, but which made a stunning spectacle. And that was all. The assembly broke up in general cordiality—not the milling, backslapping, handshaking kind of reception that Namericans would have given, but neither the elaborate and guarded courtesy of Lochlann. Individuals had talked in a friendly way to individuals, given invitations to stay in private homes, asked eager questions about the outside universe. And at last most of them walked back to town. But each foreigner got a ride in a small, exquisite electric automobile.

Only a nominal guard of crewman, and a larger detachment of Lochlanna, remained with the ship. No offense had been taken at Raven's wariness, but Tolteca still smoldered.

"Do you indeed wish to abide at my house?" asked Dawyd.

Tolteca inclined his head. "It would be an honor, Sir—" He stopped. "Forgive me, but I do not know what your title is."

"I belong to the Simnon family."

"No. I knew that. I mean your—not your name, but what you do."

"I am a physician, of that rite which heals by songs as well as medicines." (Tolteca wondered how much he was misunderstanding.) "I also have charge of a dike patrol and instruct youth at the college."

"Oh." Tolteca was disappointed. "I thought—You are not in the government, then?"

"Why, yes, I said I am in the dike patrol. What else had you in mind? Instar employs no Year-King or—No, that cannot be what you meant. Evidently the meaning of the word 'government' has diverged in our language from yours. Let me think, please." Dawyd knitted his brows.

Tolteca watched him, as if to read what could not be said. The Gwydiona all had that basic similarity which results from a very small original group of settlers and no later immigration. The first expedi-

tion had reported a legend that their ancestors were no more than a man and two women, one blond and one dark, survivors of an atomic blast lobbed at the colony by one of those fleets which went a-murdering during the Breakup. But admittedly the extant written records did not go that far back, to confirm or deny the story. Be the facts as they may, the human gene pool here was certainly limited. And yet—an unusual case—there had been no degeneracy: rather, a refinement. Early generations had followed a careful program of outbreeding. Now marriage was on a voluntary basis, but the bearers of observable hereditary defects—including low intelligence and nervous instability—were sterilized. The first expedition had said that such people submitted cheerfully to the operation, for the community honored them ever after as heroes.

Dawyd was a pure caucasoid, which alone proved how old his nation must be. He was tall, slender, still supple in middle age. His yellow hair, worn shoulder length, was grizzled, but the blue eyes required no contact lenses and the sun-tanned skin was firm. The face, clean-shaven, high of brow and strong of chin, bore a straight nose and gentle mouth. His garmets were a knee-length green tunic and white cloak, golden fillet, leather sandals, a locket about his neck which was gold on one side and black on the other. A triskele was tattooed on his forehead, but gave no effect of savagery.

His language had not changed much from Anglic; the Lochlanna had learned it without difficulty. Doubtless printed books and sound recordings had tended to stabilize it, as they generally did. But whereas Lochlann barked, grunted, and snarled, thought Tolteca, Gwydion trilled and sang. He had never heard such voices before.

"Ah, yes," said Dawyd. "I believe I grasp your concept. Yes, my advice is often asked, even on worldwide questions. That is my pride and my humility."

"Excellent. Well, Sir Councillor, I—"

"But councillor is no—no calling. I said I was a physician."

"Wait a minute, please. You have not been formally chosen in any way to guide, advise, control?"

"No. Why should I be? A man's reputation, good or ill, spreads. Finally others may come from halfway around the world, to ask his opinion of some proposal. Bear in mind, far-friend," Dawyd added shrewdly, "our whole population numbers a mere ten million, and we have both radio and aircraft, and travel a great deal between our islands."

"But then who is in charge of public affairs?"

"Oh, some communities employ a Year-King, or elect presidents to hold the chair at their local meetings, or appoint an engineer to handle routine. It depends on regional tradition. Here in Instar we lack such customs, save that we crown a Dancer each winter solstice, to bless the year."

"That isn't what I mean, Sir Physician. Suppose a—oh, a project, like building a new road, or a policy like, well, deciding whether to have regular relations with other planets—suppose this vague group of wise men you speak of, men who depend simply on a reputation for wisdom—suppose they decide such a question, one way or another. What happens next?"

"Then, normally, it is done as they have decided. Of course, everyone hears about it beforehand. If the issue is important, there will be much public discussion. But naturally men lay more weight on the suggestions of those known to be wise than on what the foolish or the uninformed may say."

"So everyone agrees with the final decision?"

"Why not? The matter has been threshed out and the most logical answer arrived at. Oh, of course a few are always unconvinced or dissatisfied. But being human, and therefore rational, they accommodate themselves to the general will."

"And—uh—funding such an enterprise?"

"That depends on its nature. A strictly local project, like building a new road, is carried out by the people of the community involved, with feasting and merriment each night. For larger and more specialized projects, money may be needed, and then its collection is a matter of local custom. We of Instar let the Dancer go about with a sack, and everyone contributes as much as is reasonable."

Tolteca gave up for the time being. He was no further along than the anthropologists of the first expedition. Except, maybe, that he was mentally prepared for some such answer as he'd received, and could accept it immediately rather than wasting weeks trying to ferret out a secret that didn't exist. If you had a society with a simple economic structure (automation helped marvelously in that respect, provided that the material desires of the people remained modest) and if you had a homogeneous population of high average intelligence and low average nastiness, well, then perhaps the ideal anarchic state was possible.

And it must be remembered that anarchy, in this case, did not mean amorphousness. The total culture of Gwydion was as intricate as any that men had ever evolved. Which in turn was paradoxical,

since advanced science and technology usually dissolved traditions and simplified interhuman relationships. However . . .

Tolteca asked cautiously, "What effect do you believe contact with other planets would have on your people? Planets where things are done in radically different ways?"

"I don't know," replied Dawyd, thoughtful. "We need more data, and a great deal more discussion, before even attempting to foresee the consequences. I do wonder if a gradual introduction of new modes may not prove better for you than any sudden change."

"For us?" Tolteca was startled.

"Remember, we have lived here a long time. We know the Apsects of God on Gwydion better than you. Just as we should be most careful about venturing to your home, so do I advise that you proceed circumspectly here."

Tolteca could not help saying, "It's strange that you never built spaceships. I gather that your people preserved, or reconstructed, all the basic scientific knowledge of their ancestors. As soon as you had a large enough population, enough economic surplus, you could have coupled a thermonuclear powerplant to a gravity beamer and a secondary-drive pulse generator, built a hull around the ensemble, and—"

"No!"

It was almost a shout. Tolteca jerked his head around to look at Dawyd. The Gwydiona had gone quite pale.

Color flowed back after a moment. He relaxed his grip on the steering rod. But his eyes were still stiffly focused ahead of him as he answered, "We do not use atomic power. Sun, water, wind, tides, and biological fuel cells, with electric accumulators for energy storage, are sufficient."

Then they were in the town. Dawyd guided the automobile through wide, straight avenues which seemed incongruous among the vine-covered houses and peaked red roofs, the parks and splashing fountains. There was only one large building to be seen, a massive structure of fused stone, rearing above chimneys with a jarring grimness. Just beyond a bridge which spanned the river in a graceful serpent shape, Dawyd halted. He had calmed down, and smiled at his guest. "My abode. Will you enter?"

As they stepped to the pavement, a tiny scarlet bird flew from the eaves, settled on Dawyd's forefinger, and warbled joy. He murmured to it, grinned half awkwardly at Tolteca, and led the way to his front door. It was screened from the street by a man-high bush with

star-shaped leaves new for the spring season. The door had a lock which was massive but unused. Tolteca recalled again that Gwydion was apparently without crime, that its people had been hard put to understand the concept when the outworlders interviewed them. Having opened the door, Dawyd turned about and bowed very low.

"O guest of the house, who may be God, most welcome and beloved, enter. In the name of joy, and health, and understanding; beneath Ynis and She and the stars; fire, food, fleet, and light be yours." He crossed himself, and reaching drew a cross on Tolteca's brow with his finger. The ritual was obviously ancient, and yet he did not gabble it, but spoke with vast seriousness.

As he entered, Tolteca noticed that the door was only faced with wood. Basically it was a slab of steel, set in walls that were—under the stucco—two meters thick and of reinforced concrete. The windows were broad; sunlight streamed through them to glow on polished wood flooring, but every window had steel shutters. The first Namerican expedition had reported it was a universal mode of building, but had not been able to find out why. From somewhat evasive answers to their questions, the anthropologists concluded it was a tradition handed down from wild early days, immediately after the colony was hellbombed; and so gentle a race did not like to talk about that period.

Tolteca forgot the matter when Dawyd knelt to light a candle before a niche. The shrine held a metal disc, half gold and half black with a bridge between, the Yang and Yin of immemorial antiquity. Yet it was flanked by books, both full-size and micro, that bore titles like *Diagnositc Application of Bioelectric Potentials*.

Dawyd got up. "Please be seated, friend of the house. My wife went into the Night." He hesitated. "She died, several years ago, and only one of my daughters is now unwedded. She danced for you this day, and thus is late coming home. When she arrives, we will take food."

Tolteca glanced at the chair to which his host had gestured. It was designed as rationally as any Namerican lounger, but made of bronze and tooled leather. He touched a fylfot recurring in the design. "I understand that you have no ornamentation which is not symbolic. That's very interesting; almost diametrically opposed to my culture. Just as an example, would you mind explaining this to me?"

"Certainly," Dawyd answered. "That is the Burning Wheel, which is to say the sun, Ynis, and all suns in the universe. The Wheel also represents Time. Thermodynamic irreversibility, if you are a physi-

cist," he added with a chuckle. "The interwoven vines are crisflowers, which bloom in the first haygathering season of our year and are therefore sacred to that Aspect of God called the Green Boy. Thus together they mean Time the Destroyer and Regenerator. The leather is from the wild arcas, which belongs to the autumnal Huntress Aspect, and when she linked with the Boy it reminds us of the Night Faces and, simultaneously, that the Day Faces are their other side. Bronze, being an alloy, manmade, says by forming the framework that man embodies the meaning and structure of the world. However, since bronze turns green on corrosion, it also signifies that every structure vanishes at last, but into new life—"

He stopped and laughed. "You don't want a sermon!" he exclaimed. "Look here, do sit down. Go ahead and smoke. We already know about that custom. We've found we can't do it ourselves—a bit of genetic drift; nicotine is too violent a poison for us, but it doesn't bother me in the least if you do. Coffee grows well on this planet, would you like a cup, or would you rather try our beer or wine? Now that we are alone for a while, I have about ten to the fiftieth questions to ask!"

III

RAVEN SPENT much of the day prowling about Instar, observing and occasionally, querying. But in the evening he left the town and wandered along the road which followed the river toward the sea dikes. A pair of his men accompanied him, two paces behind, in the byrnies and conical helmets of battle gear. Rifles were slung on their shoulders. At their backs the western hills lifted black against a sky which blazed and smoldered with gold. The river was like running metal in that light, which saturated the air and soaked into each separate grass blade. Ahead, beyond a line of trees, the eastern sky had become imperially violet and the first stars trembled.

Raven moved unhurriedly. He had no fear of being caught in the dark, on a planet with an 83-hour rotation period. When he came to a wharf that jutted into the stream, he halted for a closer look. The wooden sheds on the bank were as solidly built as any residential

house, and as handsome of outline. The double-ended fishing craft tied at the pier were graceful things, riotously decorated. They rocked a little as the water purled past them. A clean odor of their catches, and of tar and paint, drifted about.

"Ketch rigged," Raven observed. "They have small auxiliary engines, but I dare say those are used only when it is absolutely necessary."

"And otherwise they sail?" Kors, long and gaunt, spat between his front teeth. "Now why do such a fool thing, Commandant?"

"It's esthetically more pleasing," said Raven.

"More work, though, sir," offered young Wildenvey. "I sailed a bit myself, during the Ans campaign. Just keeping those damn ropes untangled—"

Raven grinned. "Oh, I agree. Quite. But you see, as far as I can gather, from the first expedition's reports and from talking to people today, the Gwydiona don't think that way."

He continued, ruminatively, more to himself than anyone else, "They don't think like either party of visitors. Their attitude toward life is different. A Namerican is concerned only with getting his work done, regardless of whether it's something that really ought to be accomplished, and then with getting his recreation done—both with maximum bustle. A Lochlanna tries to make his work and his games approach some abstract ideal; and when he fails, he's apt to give up completely and jump over into brutishness.

"But they don't seem to make such distinctions here. They say, 'Man goes where God is,' and it seems to mean that work and play and art and private life and everything else aren't divided up; no distinction is made between them, it's all one harmonious whole. So they fish from sailboats with elaborately carved figureheads and painted designs, each element in the pattern having a dozen different symbolic overtones. And they take musicians along. And they claim that the total effect, food gathering plus pleasure plus artistic accomplishment plus I don't know what, is more efficiently achieved than if those things were in neat little compartments."

He shrugged and resumed his walk. "They may be right," he finished.

"I don't know why you're so worried about them, sir," said Kors. "They're as harmless a pack of loonies as I ever met. I swear they haven't any machine more powerful than a light tractor or a scoop shovel, and no weapon more dangerous than a bow and arrow."

"The first expedition said they don't even go hunting, except once in

a while for food or to protect their crops," Raven nodded. He went on for a while, unspeaking. Only the scuff of boots, chuckling river, murmur in the leaves overhead and slowly rising thunders beyond the dike, stirred that silence. The young five-pointed leaves of a bush which grew everywhere around gave a faint green fragrance to the air. Then, far off and winding down the slopes, a bronze horn blew, calling antlered cattle home.

"That's what makes me afraid," said Raven.

Thereafter the men did not venture to break his wordlessness. Once or twice they passed a Gwydiona, who hailed them gravely, but they didn't stop. When they reached the dike, Raven led the way up a staircase to the top. The wall stretched for kilometers, set at intervals with towers. It was high and massive, but the long curve of it and the facing of undressed stone made it pleasing to behold. The river poured through a gap, across a pebbled beach, into a dredged channel and so to the crescent-shaped bay, whose waters tumbled and roared, molten in the sunset light. Raven drew his surcoat close about him; up here, above the wall's protection, the wind blew chill and wet and smelling of salt. There were many gray sea birds in the sky.

"Why did they build this?" wondered Kors.

"Close moon. Big tides. Storms make floods," said Wildenvey.

"They could have settled higher ground. They've room enough, for hellfire's sake. Ten million people on a whole planet!"

Raven gestured at the towers. "I inquired," he said. "Tidepower generators in those. Furnish most of the local electricity. Shut up."

He stood staring out to the eastern horizon, where night was growing. The waves ramped and the sea birds mewed. His eyes were bleak with thought. Finally he sat down, took a wooden flute from his sleeve, and began to play, absentmindedly, as something to do with his hands. The minor key grieved beneath the wind.

Kors' bark recalled him to the world. "Halt!"

"Be still, you oaf," said Raven. "It's her planet, not yours." But his palm rested casually on the butt of his pistol as he rose.

The girl came walking at an easy pace over the velvet-like pseudomoss which carpeted the diketop. She was some 23 or 24 standard years old, her slim shape dressed in a white tunic and wildly fluttering blue cloak. Her hair was looped in thick yellow braids, pulled back from her forehead to show a conventionalized bird tattoo. Beneath dark brows, her eyes were a blue that was almost indigo, set widely apart. The mouth and the heart-shaped face were solemn, but

the nose tiptilted and faintly dusted with freckles. She led by the hand a boy of perhaps four, a little male version of herself, who had been skipping but who sobered when he saw the Lochlanna. Both were barefoot.

"At the crossroads of the elements, greeting," she said. Her husky voice sang the language, even more than most Gwydiona voices.

"Salute, peacemaker." Raven found it simpler to translate the formal phrases of his own world than hunt around in the local vocabulary.

"I came to dance for the sea," she told him, "but heard a music that called."

"Are you a shooting man?" asked the boy.

"Byord, hush!" The girl colored with embarrassment.

"Yes," laughed Raven, "you might call me a shooting man."

"But what do you shoot?" asked Byord. "Targets? Gol! Can I shoot a target?"

"Perhaps later," said Raven. "We have no targets with us at the moment."

"Mother, he says I can shoot a target! Pow! Pow! Pow!"

Raven lifted one brow. "I thought chemical weapons were unknown on Gwydion, milady," he said, as offhand as possible.

She answered with a hint of distress, "That other ship, which came in winter. The men aboard it also had—what did they name them—guns. They explained and demonstrated. Since then, probably every small boy on the planet has imagined—Well. No harm done, I'm sure." She smiled and ruffled Byord's hair.

"Ah—I hight Raven, a Commandant of the Oakenshaw Ethnos, Windhome Mountains, Lochlann."

"And you other souls?" asked the girl.

Raven waved them back. "Followers. Sons of yeomen on my father's estate."

She was puzzled that he excluded them from the conversation, but accepted it as an alien custom. "I am Elfavy," she said, accenting the first syllable. She flashed a grin. "My son Byord you already know! His surname is Varstan, mine is Simnon."

"What?—Oh, yes, I remember. Gwydiona wives retain their family name, son's take the father's, daughters the mother's. Am I correct? Your husband—"

She looked outward. "He drowned there, during a storm last fall," she answered quietly.

Raven did not say he was sorry, for his culture had its own attitudes toward death. He couldn't help wondering aloud, tactless, "But you said you danced for the sea."

"He is of the sea now, is he not?" She continued regarding the waves, where they swirled and shook foam loose from their crests. "How beautiful it is tonight."

Then, swinging back to him, altogether at ease. "I have just had a long talk with one of your party, a Miguel Tolteca. He is staying at my father's house, where Byord and I now live."

"Not precisely one of mine," said Raven, suppressing offendedness.

"Oh? Wait . . . yes, he did mention having some men along from a different planet."

"Lochlann," said Raven. "Our sun lies near theirs, both about 50 light-years hence in that direction." He pointed past the evening star to the Hercules region.

"Is your home like his Nuevamerica?"

"Hardly." For a moment Raven wanted to speak of Lochlann—of mountains which rose sheer into a red-sun sky, trees dwarfed and gnarled by incessant winds, moorlands, ice plains, oceans too dense and bitter with salt for a man to sink. He remembered a peasant's house, its roof held down by ropes lest a gale blow it away, and he remembered his father's castle gaunt above a glacier, hoofs ringing in the courtyard, and he remembered bandits and burned villages and dead men gaping around a smashed cannon.

But she would not understand. Would she?

"Why do you have so many shooting things?" exploded from Byord. "Are there bad animals around your farms?"

"No," said Raven. "Not many wild animals at all. The land is too poor for them."

"I have heard . . . that first expedition—" Elfavy grew troubled again. "They said something about men fighting other men."

"My profession," said Raven. She looked blankly at him. Wrong word, then. "My calling," he said, though that wasn't right either.

"But killing *men!*" she cried.

"Bad men?" asked Byord, round-eyed.

"Hush," said his mother. " 'Bad' means when something goes wrong, like the cynwyr swarming down and eating the grain. How can men go wrong?"

"They get sick," Byord said.

"Yes, and then your grandfather heals them."

"Imagine a situation where men often get so sick they want to hurt their own kind," said Raven.

"But horrible!" Elfavy traced a cross in the air. "What germ causes that?"

Raven sighed. If she couldn't even visualize homicidal mania, how explain to her that sane, honorable men found sane, honorable reasons for hunting each other?

He heard Kors mutter to Wildenvey, "What I said. Guts of sugar candy."

If that were only so, thought Raven, he could forget his own unease. But they were no weaklings on Gwydion. Not when they took open sailboats onto oceans whose weakest tides rose fifteen meters. Not when this girl could visibly push away her own shock, face him, and ask with friendly curiosity—as if he, Raven, should address questions to the sudden apparition of a sabertoothed weaselcat.

"Is that the reason why your people and the Namericans seem to talk so little to each other? I thought I noticed it in the town, but didn't know then who came from which group."

"Oh, they've done their share of fighting on Nuevamerica," said Raven dryly. "As when they expelled us. We had invaded their planet and divided it into fiefs, over a century ago. Their revolution was aided by the fact that Lochlann was simultaneously fighting the Grand Alliance—but still, it was well done of them."

"I cannot see why—Well, no matter. We will have time enough to discuss things. You are going into the hills with us, are you not?"

"Why, yes, if—What did you say? You too?"

Elfavy nodded. Her mouth quirked upward. "Don't be so aghast, far-friend. I will leave Byord with his aunt and uncle, even if they do spoil him terribly." She gave the boy a brief hug. "But the group does need a dancer, which is my calling."

"Dancer?" choked Kors.

"Not *the* Dancer. He is always a man."

"But—" Raven relaxed. He even smiled. "In what way does an expedition into the wilderness require a dancer?"

"To dance for it," said Elfavy. "What else?"

"Oh . . . nothing. Do you know precisely what this journey is for?"

"You have not heard? I listened while my father and Miguel talked it over."

"Yes, naturally I know. But possibly you have misunderstood something. That's easy to do, even for an intelligent person, when

separate cultures meet. Why don't you explain it to me in your own words, so that I can correct you if need be?" Raven's ulterior motive was simply that he enjoyed her presence and wanted to keep her here a while longer.

"Thank you, that is a good idea," she said. "Well, then, planets where men can live without special equipment are rare and far between. The Nuevamericans, who are exploring this galactic sector, would like a base on Gwydion, to refuel their ships, make any necessary repairs, and rest their crews in greenwoods." She gave Kors and Wildenvey a surprised look, not knowing why they both laughed aloud. Raven himself would not have interrupted her naive recital for money.

She brushed the blown fair hair off her brow and resumed, "Of course, our people must decide whether they wish this or not. But meanwhile it can do no harm to look at possible sites for such a base, can it? Father proposed an uninhabited valley some days' march inland, beyond Mount Granis. To journey there afoot will be more pleasant than by air; much can be shown you and discussed en route; and we would still return before Bale time."

She frowned the faintest bit. "I am not certain it is wise to have a foreign base so near the Holy City. But that can always be argued later." Her laughter trilled forth. "Oh, dear, I do ramble, don't I?" She caught Raven's arm, impulsively, and tucked her own under it. "But you have seen so many worlds, you can't imagine how we here have been looking forward to meeting you. The wonder of it! The stories you can tell us, the songs you can sing us!

She dropped her free hand to Byord's shoulder. "Wait till this little chatterbird gets over his shyness with you, far-friend. If we could only harness his questions to a generator, we could illuminate the whole of Instar!

"Awww," said the boy, wriggling free.

They began to walk along the diketop, almost aimlessly. The two soldiers followed. The rifles on their backs stood black against a cloud like roses. Elfavy's fingers slipped down from Raven's awkwardly held arm—men and women did not go together thus on Lochlann—and closed on the flute in his sleeve. "What is this?" she asked.

He drew it forth. It was a long piece of darvawood, carved and polished to bring out the grain. "I am not a very good player," he said. "A man of rank is expected to have some artistic skills. But I am only a younger son, which is why I wander about seeking work for my guns, and I have not had much musical instruction."

"The sounds I heard were—" Elfavy searched after a word. "They spoke to me," she said finally, "but not in a language I knew. Will you play that melody again?"

He set the flute to his lips and piped the notes, which were cold and sad. Elfavy shivered, catching her mantle to her and touching the gold-and-black locket at her throat. "There is more than music here," she said. "That song comes from the Night Faces. It is a song, is it not?"

"Yes. Very ancient. From Old Earth, they say, centuries before men had reached even their own sun's planets. We still sing it on Lochlann."

"Can you put it into Gwydiona for me?"

"Perhaps. Let me think." He walked for a while more, turning phrases in his head. A military officer must also be adept in the use of words, and the two languages were close kin. Finally he sounded a few bars, lowered the flute, and began.

"The wind doth blow today, my love,
And a few small drops of rain.
I never had but one true love,
And she in her grave was lain.

"I'll do as much for my true love
As any young man may;
I'll sit and mourn all at her grave
For a twelvemonth and a day. . . .

"The twelvemonth and a day being up,
The dead began to speak:
'Oh who sits weeping on my grave
And will not let me sleep?' "

He felt her grow stiff, and halted his voice. She said, through an unsteady mouth, so low he could scarce hear, "No. Please."

"Forgive me," he said in puzzlement, "if I have—" What?

"You couldn't know. I couldn't." She glanced after Byord. The boy had frisked back to the soldiers. "He was out of earshot. It doesn't matter, then, much."

"Can you tell me what is wrong?" he asked, hopeful of a clue to the source of his own doubts.

"No." She shook her head. "I don't know what. It just frightens me somehow. Horribly. How can you live with such a song?"

"On Lochlann we think it quite a beautiful little thing."

"But the dead don't speak. They are *dead!*"

"Of course. It was only a fantasy. Don't you have myths?"

"Not like that. The dead go into the Night, and the Night becomes the Day, is the Day. Like Ragan, who was caught in the Burning Wheel, and rose to heaven and was cast down again, and was wept over by the Mother—those are Aspects of God, they mean the rainy season that brings dry earth to life and they also mean dreams and the waking from dreams, and loss-remembrance-recreation, and the transformations of physical energy, and— Oh, don't you see, it's all one! It isn't two people separate, becoming nothing, desiring to be nothing, even. It mustn't be!"

Raven put away his flute. They walked on until Elfavy broke from him, danced a few steps, a slow and stately dance which suddenly became a leap. She ran back smiling and took his arm again.

"I'll forget it," she said. "Your home is very distant. This is Gwydion, and too near Bale time to be unhappy."

"What is this Bale time?"

"When we go to the Holy City," she said. "Once each year. Each Gwydiona year, that is, which I believe makes about five of Old Earth's. Everybody, all over the planet, goes to the Holy City maintained by his own district. It may be a dull wait for you people, unless you can join us. . . . Perhaps you can!" she exclaimed, and eagerness washed out the last terror.

"What happens?" Raven asked.

"God comes to us."

"Oh." He thought of dionysiac rites among various backward people and asked with great care, "Do you see God, or feel Vwi?" The last word was a pronoun; Gwydiona employed an extra gender, the universal.

"Oh, no," said Elfavy. "We are God."

IV

THE DANCE ended in a final exultant jump, wings fluttering iridescent and the bird head turned skyward. The men who has been playing music for it put down their pipes and drums. The dancer's plumage swept the ground as she bowed. She vanished into a canebrake. The audience, seated and crosslegged, closed eyes for an unspeaking minute. Tolteca thought it a more gracious tribute than applause.

He looked around again as the ceremony broke up and men prepared for sleep. It didn't seem quite real to him, yet, that camp should be pitched, supper eaten, and the time come for rest, while the sun had not reached noon. That was because of the long day, of course. Gwydion was just past vernal equinox. But even at its mild and rainy midwinter, daylight had lasted a couple of sleeps.

The effect hadn't been so noticeable at Instar. The town used an auroral generator to give soft outdoor illumination after dark, and went about its business. Thus it had only taken a couple of planetary rotations to organize this party. They marched for the hills at dawn. Already one leisurely day had passed on the trail, with two campings; and one night, where the moon needed little help from the travelers' glowbulbs; and now another forenoon. Sometime tomorrow—Gwydion tomorrow—they ought to reach the upland site which Dawyd had suggested for the spaceport.

Tolteca could feel the tiredness due rough kilometers in his muscles, but he wasn't sleepy yet. He stood up, glancing over the camp. Dawyd had selected a good spot, a meadow in the forest. The half-dozen Gwydiona men who accompanied him talked merrily as they banked the fire and spread out sleeping bags. One man, standing watch against possible carnivores, carried a longbow. Tolteca had seen what that weapon could do, when a hunter brought in an arcas for meat. Nonetheless he wondered why everyone had courteously refused those firearms the *Quetzal* brought as gifts.

The ten Namerican scientists and engineers who had come along were in more of a hurry to bed down. Tolteca chuckled, recalling their dismay when he announced that this trip would be on shank's mare. But Dawyd was right, there was no better way to learn an area. Raven had also joined the group, with two of his men. The Lochlanna seemed incapable of weariness, and their damned slithering politeness never failed them, but they were always a little apart from the rest.

Tolteca sauntered past the canebrake, following a side path. Though no one lived in these hills, the Gwydiona often went here for recreation, and small solar-powered robots maintained the trails. He had not quite dared hope he would meet Elfavy. But when she came around a flowering tree, the heart leaped in him.

"Aren't you tired?" he asked, lame-tongued, after she stopped and gave greeting.

"Not much," she answered. "I wanted to stroll for a while before sleep. Like you."

"Well, let's go into partnership."

She laughed. "An interesting concept. You have so many commercial enterprises on your planet, I hear. Is this another one? Hiring out to take walks for people who would rather sit at home?"

Tolteca bowed. "If you'll join me, I'll make a career of that."

She flushed and said quickly, "Come this way. If I remember this neighborhood from the last time I was here, it has a beautiful view not far off."

She had changed her costume for a plain tunic. Sunlight came through leaves to touch her lithe dancer's body; the hair, loosened, fell in waves down her back. Tolteca could not find the words he really wanted, nor could he share her easy silence.

"We don't do everything for money on Nuevamerica," he said, afraid of what she might think. "It's only, well, our particular way of organizing our economy."

"I know," she said. "To me it seems so . . . impersonal, lonely, each man fending for himself—but that may just be because I am not used to the idea."

"Our feeling is that the state should do as little as possible," he said, earnest with the ideals of his nation. "Otherwise it will get too much power, and that's the end of freedom. But then private enterprise must take over; and it must be kept competitive, or it will in turn develop into a tyranny." Perforce he used several words which Gwydiona lacked, such as the last. He had introduced them to her before, during conversations at Dawyd's house, when they had tried to comprehend each other's viewpoints.

"But why should the society, or the state as you call it, be opposed to the individual?" she asked. "I still don't grasp what the problem is, Miguel. We seem to do much as we please, all the time, here on Gwydion. Most of our enterprises are private, as you put it." *No*, he thought, *not as I put it. Your folk are only interested in making a living. The profit motive, in the economists' sense of the word, isn't*

there. He forebore to interrupt. "But this unregulated activity seems to work for everyone's mutual benefit," she continued. "Money is only a convenience. Its possession does not give a man power over his fellows."

"You are universally reasonable," Tolteca said. "That isn't true of any other planet I know about. Nor do you need to curb violence. You hardly know what anger is. And hate—another word which isn't in your language. Hate is to be *always* angry with someone else." He saw shock on her face, and hurried to add, "Then we must contend with the lazy, the greedy, the unscrupulous— Do you know, I begin to wonder if we should carry out this project. It may be best that your planet have nothing to do with the others. You are too good; you could be too badly hurt."

She shook her head. "No, don't think that. Obviously we are different from you. Perhaps genetic drift has caused us to lose a trait or two otherwise common to mankind. But the difference isn't great, and it doesn't make us superior. Remember, you came to us. We never managed to build spaceships."

"Never chose to," he corrected her.

He recalled a remark of Raven's, one day in Instar. "It isn't natural for humans to be consistently gentle and rational. They've done tremendous things here for so small a population. They don't lack energy. But where does their excess energy go?" At the time, Tolteca had bristled. Only a professional killer would be frightened by total sanity, he thought. Now he began, unwilling, to see that Raven had asked a legitimate scientific question.

"There is much that we never chose to do," said Elfavy with a hint of wistfulness.

"I admit wondering why you don't at least colonize the uninhabited parts of Gwydion."

"We stabilized the population by general agreement, several centuries ago. More people would only destroy nature."

They emerged from the woods again. Another meadow sloped upward to a cliff edge. The grass was strewn with white flowers; here and there a tree stood, slender, full of gold blossoms; the common bush of star-shaped leaves grew everywhere about, its buds swelling, the air heady from their odor. Beyond this spine of the hills lay a deep valley and then the mountains rose, clear and powerful against the sky.

Elfavy swept an arm in an arc. "Should we crowd out this?" she asked.

Tolteca thought of his own brawling unrestful folk, the forests they had already raped, and made no answer.

The girl stood a moment, frowning, on the clifftop. A west wind blew strongly, straining the tunic against her and tossing sunlit locks of hair. Tolteca caught himself staring so rudely that he forced his eyes away, across kilometers toward that gray volcanic cone named Mount Granis.

"No," said Elfavy with some reluctance, "I must not be smug. People did live here once. Just a few farmers and woodcutters, but they did maintain isolated homes. However, that is long past. Nowadays everyone lives in a town. And I don't believe we would reoccupy regions like this even if it were safe. It would be wrong. All life has a right to existence, does it not? Men shouldn't wear more of a Night Face than they must."

Tolteca found some difficulty in concentrating on her meaning, the sound was so pleasant. Night Face—oh, yes, part of the Gwydiona religion.(If "religion" was the right word. "Philosophy" might be better. "Way of life" might be still more accurate.) Since they believed everything to be a facet of that eternal and infinite Oneness which they called God, it followed that God was also death, ruin, sorrow. But they didn't say much, or seem to think much, about that side of reality. He remembered that their arts and literature, like their daily lives, were mostly sunny, cheerful, completely logical once you had mastered the complex symbolisms. Pain was gallantly endured. The suffering or death of someone beloved was mourned in a controlled manner which Raven admired, but Tolteca had trouble understanding.

"I don't believe your people could harm nature," he said. "You work with it, make yourselves part of it."

"That's the ideal." Elfavy snickered. "But I'm afraid practice has no more statistical correlation with preaching on Gwydion than anywhere else in the universe." She knelt and began to pluck the small white flowers. "I shall make a garland of jule for you," she said. "A sign of friendship, since the jule blooms when the growth season is being reborn. Now that's a nice harmonious thing for me to do, isn't it? And yet if you asked the plant, it might not agree!"

"Thank you," he said, overwhelmed.

"The Bird Maiden had a chaplet of jule," she said. By now he realized that the retelling of symbolic myths was a standard conversational gambit here, like a Lochlanna's inquiry after the health of your father. "That is why I wore bird costume this time. It is her time of

year, and today is the Day of the River Child. When the Bird Maiden met the River Child, he was lost and crying. She carried him home and gave him her crown." She glanced up. "It is a seasonal myth," she explained, "the end of the rains, lowland floods, then sunlight and the blossoming jule. Plus those moral lessons the elders are always quacking about, plus a hundred other possible interpretations. The entire tale is too complicated to tell on a warm day, even if the episode of the Riddling Tree is one of our best poems. But I always like to dance the story."

She fell silent, her hands busy in the grass. For lack of anything else, he pointed to one of the large budding bushes. "What's this called?" he asked.

"With the five-pointed leaves? Oh, baleflower. It grows everywhere. You must have noticed the one in front of my father's house."

"Yes. It must have quite a lot of mythology."

Elfavy stopped. She glanced at him and away. For an instant the evening-blue eyes seemed almost blind. "No," she said.

"What? But I thought . . . I thought everything means something on Gwydion, as well as being something. Usually it has many different meanings—"

"This is only baleflower." Her voice grew thin. "Nothing else."

Tolteca pulled himself up short. Some taboo—no, surely not that, the Gwydiona were even freer from arbitrary prohibitions than his own people. But if she was sensitive about it, best not to pursue the subject.

The girl finished her work, jumped to her feet, and flung a wreath about his neck. "There!" she laughed. "Wait, hold still, it's caught on one ear. Ah, good."

He gestured at the second one she had made. "Aren't you going to put that on yourself?"

"Oh, no. A jule garland is always for someone else. This is for Raven."

"What?" Tolteca stiffened.

Again she flushed and looked past him toward the mountains. "I got to know him a little in Instar. I drove him around, showing him the sights. Or we walked."

Tolteca thought of the many times in those long moonlit nights when she had not been at home. He said, "I don't believe Raven is your sort," and heard his voice go ragged.

"I don't understand him," she whispered. "And yet in a way I do. Maybe. As I might understand a storm."

She started back toward camp. Tolteca must needs follow. He said bitterly, "I should think you, of everyone alive, would be immune to such cheap glamour. Soldier! Hereditary aristocrat!"

"Those things I don't comprehend," she said, her eyes still averted. "To kill people, or make them do your bidding, as if they were machines—But it isn't that way with him. Not really."

They went down the trail in stillness, boots thudding next to sandals. At last she murmured, "He lives with the Night Faces. All the time. I can't even bear to think of that, but he endures it."

Enjoys it, Tolteca wanted to growl. But he saw he had been backbiting, and held his peace.

V

THEY RETURNED to find most of the party asleep, eyelids padded against the daylight. The sentry saluted them with a raised arrow. Elfavy continued to the edge of camp, where the three Lochlanna had spread their bedrolls. Kors snored, a gun in his hand; Wildenvey looked too young and helpless for his gory shipboard brags. Raven was still awake. He squatted on his heels and scowled at a sheaf of photographs.

As Elfavy approached, his grin sprang forth; even to Tolteca, he seemed quite honestly pleased. "Well, this is a happy chance," he called. "Will you join me? I have a pot of tea on the grill over the coals."

"No, thank you. I like that tea stuff of yours, but it would keep me from sleeping." Elfavy stood before him, looking down at the ground. The wreath dangled in her hand. "I only—"

"Never come between an Oakenshaw and his tea," said Raven. "Ah, there, Sir Engineer."

Elfavy's face burned. "I only wanted to see you for a moment," she faltered.

"And I you. Someone mentioned former habitation in this area,

and I noticed traces on a ridge near here. So I went there with a camera." Raven flowed erect and fanned out his self-developing films. "It was a thorp once, several houses and outbuildings. Not much left now."

"No. Long abandoned." The girl lifted her wreath and lowered it again.

Raven gave her a steady look. "Destroyed," he said.

"Oh? Oh, yes. I have heard this region was dangerous. The volcano—"

"No natural disaster," said Raven. "I know the signs. My men and I cleared away the brush with a flash pistol and dug in the ground. Those buildings had wooden roofs and rafters, which burned. We found two human skeletons, more or less complete. One had a skull split open, the other a corroded iron object between the ribs." He raised the pictures toward her eyes. "Do you see?"

"Oh." She stepped back. One hand crept to her mouth. "What—"

"Everyone tells me there is no record of men killing men on Gwydion," said Raven in a metallic voice. "It's not merely rare, it's unknown. And yet that thorp was attacked and burned once."

Elfavy gulped. Anger rushed into Tolteca, thick and hot. "Look here, Raven," he snapped, "you may be free to bully some poor Lochlanna peasant, but—"

"No," said Elfavy. "Please."

"Did every home up here suffer a like fate?" Raven flung the questions at her, not loudly but nonetheless like bullets. "Were the hills deserted because it was too hazardous to live in isolation?"

"I don't know." Elfavy's tone lifted with an unevenness it had not borne until now. "I . . . have seen ruins once in a while . . . nobody knows what happened." A sudden yell: "*Everything* isn't written in the histories, you know! Do you know every answer to every question about your own planet?"

"Of course not," said Raven. "But if this were my world, I'd at least know why all the buildings are constructed like fortresses."

"Like what?"

"You know what I mean."

"Why, you asked me that once before. . . . I told you," she stammered. "The strength of the house, the family—a symbol—"

"I heard the myth," said Raven. "I was also assured that no one has ever believed those myths to be literal truths, only poetic expressions. Your charming tale about Anren who made the stars has not

prevented you from having an excellent grasp of astrophysics. So what are you guarding against? What are you afraid of?"

Elfavy crouched back. "Nothing." The words rattled from her. "If, if, if there were anything . . . wouldn't we have better weapons against it . . . than bows and spears? People get hurt—by accidents, by sickness and old age. They die, the Night has them—But nothing else! There can't be!"

She whirled about and fled.

Tolteca stepped toward Raven, who stood squinting after the girl. "Turn around," he said. "I'm going to beat the guts out of you."

Raven laughed, a vulpine bark. "How much combat karate do you know, trader's clerk?"

Tolteca dropped a hand to his gun. "We're in another culture," he said between his teeth. "A generation of scientific study won't be enough to map its thought processes. If you think you can go trampling freely on these people's feelings, no more aware of what you're doing than a bulldozer with a broken autopilot—"

They both felt the ground shiver. An instant afterward the sound reached them, booming down the sky.

The three Lochlanna were on their feet in a ring, weapons aimed outward, without seeming to have moved. Elsewhere the camp stumbled awake, men calling to each other through thunders.

Tolteca ran after Elfavy. The sun seemed remote and heatless, the explosions rattled his teeth together, he felt the earth vibrations in his boots.

The noise died away, but echoes flew about for seconds longer. Dawyd joined Elfavy and threw his arms around her. A flock of birds soared up, screaming.

The physician's gaze turned westward. Black smoke boiled above the treetops. As Tolteca reached the Simnons, he saw Dawyd trace the sign against misfortune.

"What is it?" shouted the Namerican. "What happened?"

Dawyd looked his way. For a moment the old eyes were without recognition. Then he answered curtly, "Mount Granis."

"Oh." Tolteca slapped his forehead. The relief was such that he wanted to howl his laughter. Of course! A volcano cleared its throat, after a century or two of quiet. Why in the galaxy were the Gwydiona breaking camp?

"I never expected this," said Dawyd. "Though probably our seismology is less well developed than yours."

"Our man made some checks, and didn't think we would have any serious trouble if we built a spaceport here," said Tolteca. "That wasn't a real eruption, you know. Just a bit of lava and a good deal of smoke."

"And a west wind," said Dawyd. "Straight from Granis to us."

He paused before adding, almost absent-mindedly, "The site I had in mind for your base is protected from this sort of thing. I checked the airflow patterns with the central meteorological computer at Bettwis, and the fumes never will get there. It is a mere unlucky happenstance that we should be at this exact spot, this very moment. Now we must run, and may fear give speed to us."

"From a little smoke?" asked Tolteca incredulously.

Dawyd held his daughter close. "This is a young planetary system," he said. "Rich in heavy metals. That smoke and dust, when it arrives, will include enough such material to kill us."

By the time they got in motion, jogging south along a sparsely wooded ridge, the cloud had overshadowed them. Kors looked past a dim red ball of sun, estimating with an artilleryman's eye. His lantern jaw worked a moment, as if chewing sour cud, before he spoke.

"We can't go back the way we came, Commandant. That muck'll fall out all over these parts. We've got to keep headed this way and hope we can get out from under. Ask one of those yokels if he knows a decent trail."

"Must we have a trail?" puffed Wildenvey. "Let's cut right through the woods."

Listen to the for-Harry's-sake heathdweller talk!" jeered Kors. "Porkface, I grew up in the Ernshaw. Have you ever tried to run through brush?"

"Save your breath, you two," advised Raven. He loped a little faster until he joined Dawyd and Elfavy at the head of the line. Grass whispered under his boots, now and then a hobnail rang on a stone and sparks showered. The sky was dull brown, streaked with black, the light from it like tarnished brass and casting no shadows. The only bright things in the world were an occasional fire-spit from Mount Granis, and Elfavy's flying hair.

Raven put the question to her. He spaced his words with his breathing, which he kept in rhythm with his feet. The girl replied in the same experienced manner. "In this direction, all paths converge on the Holy City. We ought to be safe there, if we can reach it soon enough."

"Before Bale time?" exclaimed Dawyd.

"Is it forbidden?" asked Raven, and wondered if he would use his guns to enter a refuge tabooed.

"No . . . no rule of conduct . . . But nobody goes there outside Bale time!" Dawyd shook his head, bewildered. "It would be a meaningless act."

"Meaningless—to save our lives?" protested Raven.

"Unsymbolic," said Elfavy. "It would fit into no pattern." She lifted her face to the spreading darkness and cried, "But what sense would it make to breathe that dust? I want to see Byord again!"

"Yes. So. So be it." Dawyd shut his mouth and concentrated on making speed.

Raven's eyes, watching the uneven ground, touched the girl's quick feet and stayed there. Not until he tripped on a vine did he remember exactly where he was. Then he swore and forced himself to think of the situation. Without analytical apparatus, he had no way to confirm that volcanic ash was as dangerous as Dawyd claimed; but it seemed reasonable, on a planet like this. The first expedition had been warned about many vegetable species that were poisonous to man simply because they grew in soil loaded with heavy elements. It wouldn't take a lot of inhaled metallic material to destroy you: radioactives, arsenates, perhaps mercury liberated from its oxide by heat. A few gulps and you were done. Dying might take a while, prolonged by the medics' attempts to get a hopelessly big dose out of your body. Not that Raven intended to watch his own lungs and brain go rotten. His pistol could do him a final service. But Elfavy—

They stopped to rest at the head of a downward trail. One of the Gwydiona objected through a dried-out throat: "Not the Holy City! We'd destroy the entire meaning of Bale!"

"No, we wouldn't." Dawyd, who had been thinking as he trotted, answered with an authority that pulled their reddened eyes to him. "The eruption at the moment when we happened to be downwind was an accident so improbable it was senseless. Right? The Night Face called Chaos." Several men crossed themselves, but they nodded agreement. "If we redress the matter—restore the balance of events, of logical sequence—by entering the Fòcus of God (in our purely human *persona* at that, which makes our act a parable of man's conscious reasoning powers, his science)—what could be more significant?"

They mulled it over while the gloom thickened and Mount Granis

boomed at their backs. One by one, they murmured assent. Tolteca whispered to Raven, in Ispanyo, "Oa, I do believe I see a new myth being born."

"Yes. They'll doubtless bring one of their quasi-gods into it, a few generations hence, while preserving an accurate historical account of what really happened!"

"But by all creation! Here they are, running from an unnecessarily horrible death, and they argue whether it would be artistic to shelter in this temple spot!"

"It makes more sense than you think," said Raven somberly. "I remember once when I was a boy, my very first campaign in fact. A civil war, the Bitter Water clan against my own Ethnos. We boxed a regiment of them in the Stawr Hills, expecting them to dig in. They wouldn't, because there were brave men's graves everywhere around, the Danoora who fell three hundred years ago. They came out prepared to be mowed down. When we grasped the situation, we let them go, gave them a day's head start. They reached their main body, which perhaps turned the course of the war. But that victory would have cost us too much."

Tolteca shook his head. "I don't understand you."

"You wouldn't."

"Any more than you would understand why men died to pull down the foreign castles on our planet."

"Well, maybe so."

Raven wondered how much lethal dust he was already breathing. Not enough to matter, yet, he decided. The air was still clean in his nostrils, he could still see far across hills and down forested slopes. The heavy particles and stones were not dangerous. It was the finely divided material, slowly settling over many hectares, which could kill men.

Like a mind-reader, Dawyd said to him, "The Holy City will be almost ideal for us. Airflow patterns protect it too from the ash, where it lies right under the Steeps of Kolumkill. The site was chosen with that in mind, even though our local volcanoes very rarely erupt. We shall have to wait there till the next rain, which may take a few days at this season. That will carry down the last airborne dust, leach from the soil what has fallen, wash the poison into the rivers and so into the sea, safely diluted. The City has ample food supplies, and I see no reason why we should not avail ourselves of them."

He rose. "But first we must get there," he finished. "Does everyone have his breath back?"

VI

THE REST OF the journey was little remembered. They went at a dogtrot, along well-kept trails, under cool leaves; they halted a few minutes at a time when it seemed indicated; but toward the end men lurched along in each other's arms. Three Namericans collapsed. Dawyd had poles chopped and raincoats spread to make litters for them. No one complained at the burden. Perhaps that was only because no energy was left to complain.

When he entered the Holy City, Raven himself scarcely saw it. He retained enough strength to spread a bedroll for Elfavy, who sprawled quietly down and passed out. He brought a cup of water for Dawyd, who lay on his back and stared with eyes emptied of awareness. He even washed the grime and sweat from himself before crawling into his own bag. But then darkness clubbed him.

When he awoke, it took a few seconds before he knew his own name, and a bit longer to fix his location. He rallied those drilled reflexes by which he could deny to himself that he was stiff and aching. Shadow from a wall covered him, but he looked straight up to the stars. Had he slept so long? The sky was utterly clear; men were indeed safe in this place. The constellations glittered in unfamiliar patterns. He could barely recognize the one they called The Plowman on Lochlann: its distortion made him feel cold and alone. The Nebula, dimming some parts of the sky and blotting out others, was somehow less alien.

He left his bag, hunkered in the dark and opened the packsack that had been his pillow with fingers too schooled to need light. Quickly he dressed. Dagger and pistol made a conforting drag on his flanks. He threw a wide-sleeved tunic over the drab route clothes, for it flaunted the crests of his family and nation, and he glided between men still unconscious, into the open.

The night was very quiet. He stood in a forum, if it could be so named. There was no paving in the Holy City, but thick pseudomoss lay cool and full of dew under his feet. On every side rose white marble buildings, long and low, fluted delicate columns upholding portico roofs where figures danced on friezes. Their doorless main entrances gaped wide atop mossy ramps, but the windows were mere slits. Colonades and wings knitted them together in a labyrinthine unity. Behind the square that they defined stood a ring of towers, airily slender, with bronze cupolas that must show a soft green by

daylight. The entire place was surrounded by an amphitheater, or whatever you wanted to call it: low moss-carpeted tiers enclosing the city like the sides of a chalice. Trees grew thickly on its top.

Down here on the bottom there were no trees; but many formal gardens—rather, a single, reticulated one, interwoven with the houses and the towers—held beds of Terran violets and thornless roses, native jule and sunbloom and baleflower and much else which Raven didn't recognize. Southward, above the rim of the chalice, those cliffs called the Steeps of Kolumkill shouldered against the stars.

He was able to see much detail, for the moon She was rising in the west. Its retrograde path would take it over the sky and through half a cycle of phases during half a night period. Already it was a white semicircle, a degree in angular diameter, filling the hollow with unreal light.

A fountain tinkled in the middle of the forum. Raven had cleaned himself there before he slept. He crossed to its little moss-grown bowl and drank until his mummy gullet felt alive again. The water gurgled back down a whimsical drainpipe, a grotesque fish face. Well, why shouldn't there be humor in the geometric center of sacredness? thought Raven. The people of Gwydion laughed more than most, not raucously like a Namerican or wolfishly like a Lochlanna, but a gentle mirth which found something comical in the grandest things. The water must come from some woodland spring, it had a wild taste.

He heard a noise and whirled about, one hand on his gun. Elfavy entered the moonlight. "Oh," he said stupidly. "Are you awake, milady?"

She chuckled. "No. I am sound asleep in my bed in Instar." Treading close: "I woke an hour or more ago, but didn't want to move. Not for a day, at least! Then I saw you here, and—" Her voice trailed off.

Raven directed his heartbeat to slow down. It obeyed poorly. "Someone should keep watch," he said. "May as well be me."

"No need, far-friend. There are no dangers here."

"Wild animals?"

"Robots keep them off. Other robots maintain the grounds." She pointed to a little wheeled machine weeding a rosebed with delicate tendrils.

Raven grinned. "Ah, but who maintains the robots?"

"Silly! An automatic unit, of course. Every five years—local years, I mean, so it's about once in a generation—our engineers hold a midwinter ceremony where they inspect the facilities and bring in fresh supplies."

"I see. And otherwise no one ever comes here except at, uh, Bale time?"

She nodded. "No reason to. Shall we look around? Walking might get the cramp out of my legs." She made the suggestion with no trace of awe, as if offering to show him any local curiosum.

Their feet fell noiseless on the moss, and its springiness seemed to remove much of their exhaustion. The buildings looked like faerie work, there under the brutal mass of Kolumkill; but as he reached a doorway, Raven saw that their walls were heavy and strong as the rest of Gwydiona architecture. Within, light came from fluoros, recessed in the high ceiling; probably solar battery powered, Raven thought. The illumination was dim, but there was little to see anyhow: a gracious anteroom, archways opening on corridors.

"We mustn't go very deeply in," said the girl, "or we could get lost and blunder around for quite some time before finding our way out. Look." She pointed down a hall, toward an intersection whence five other passages radiated. "That is only the edge of the maze."

Raven touched a wall. It yielded to his fingers, the same rubbery gray substance that covered the floor. "What's this?" he asked. "A synthetic elastomer? Does it line the whole interior?"

"Yes," said Elfavy. Her tone grew indifferent. "There's nothing in here, really. Let's go up in one of the towers, then you can see the total pattern."

"A moment, if you grant." Raven opened one of the doors which marched along the nearest corridor. It was steel, as usual, though coated with the soft plastic, and had an inside bolt. The room beyond was ventilated through a slit-window. A toilet and water tap were the only furnishings, but a heap of stuffed bags filled one corner. "What's in those?" he inquired.

"Food, sealed in plastiskins," Elfavy answered. "An artificial food, which keeps indefinitely. I'm afraid you won't find it very exciting when we must live off it, but everything necessary for nutrition is included."

"You seem to live rather austerely at Bale time," said Raven. He watched her from the edge of an eye.

"It is no time to worry about material needs. Instead, you grab a

sack of food and slit it open with your thumbnail when hungry, drink from a tap or fountain when thirsty, flop down anywhere when sleepy."

"I see. But what is the important thing you do, to which keeping alive is just incidental?"

"I told you." She left the room with a quick nervous stride. "We are God."

"But when I asked you what you meant by that, you said you couldn't explain."

"I can't." She evaded his glance. Her voice was not perfectly level. "Don't you see, it goes beyond language. Any language. Mankind employs several, you realize, besides speech. Mathematics is one, music another, painting another, choreography another, and so on. According to what you have told me, Gwydion seems to be the only planet where myth was also developed, deliberately and systematically, as still a different language—not by primitives who confused it with the concepts of science or common sense, but by people trained in semantics, who knew that each language describes one single facet of reality, and wanted myth to help them talk about something for which the others are inadequate. You can't believe, for instance, that mathematics and poetry are interchangeable!"

"No," said Raven.

She brushed back her tousled hair and went on, eager now. "Well, what happens at Bale time could only be described by a fusion of every language, including those no human being has yet imagined. And such super-language is impossible, because it would be self-contradictory."

"Do you mean that during Bale you perceive, or commune with, total reality?"

They came out into the open again. She hastened across the forum, through the barred shadow of a colonnade to the spires beyond. He had never seen anything so beautiful as the sight of her running in the moonlight. She stopped at a tower doorway, it cast a darkness over her and she said from the darkness, "That's merely another set of words, *liatha*. Not even a label. I wish you could be here yourself and know!"

They entered and started upward. A padded ramp wound around small rooms. The passage was wanly lit and stuffy. After a silence, Raven asked, "What was it you called me?"

"What?" He couldn't be sure in the gloom, but he thought her face was stained with quick color.

"*Liatha.* I don't know that word."

Her lashes fluttered down. "Nothing," she mumbled. "An expression."

"Ah, let me guess." He wanted to make a joke, to suggest that it meant oaf, barbarian, villain, swinedog, but remembered that Gwydiona had no such terms. Since she looked at him with enormous expectant eyes he must blunder, "Darling, beloved—"

She stopped, shrinking back against the wall in dismay. "You said you didn't know!"

The discipline of a lifetime kept him walking. When she rejoined him he made himself say, lightly, through a clamor, "You are most kind, peacemaker, but I don't need any further flattery than the fact that you have time to spare for me."

"There will be time enough for everything else," she whispered, "after you are gone."

The highest room, immediately under the cupola, was the only one which possessed a true window, rather than a slit. Moonlight cataracted past its bronze grille. The air was warm, but that light made Elfavy's hair seem to crackle with frost. She pointed out at the intricate interlocking of labyrinth, towers, and flowerbeds. "The hexagons inscribed in circles mean the laws of nature," she began in a subdued voice, "their regularity enclosed in some greater scheme. It is the sign of Owan the Sunsmith, who—" She stopped. Neither of them had been listening. They searched each other's faces under the fenced-off moon.

"Must you go?" she asked finally.

"I have made promises at home," he said.

"But after they are fulfilled?"

"I don't know." He considered the stranger sky. In the southern hemisphere, which was oriented more nearly toward the direction whence he had come, the constellations would be less changed. But no one lived in the southern hemisphere. "I've known people from one place, one culture, who tried to settle into another," he said. "It rarely works."

"It might. If there were willingness. A Gwydiona, for example, could be happy even on, well, on Lochlann."

"I wonder."

"Will you do something for me? Now?"

His pulses jumped. "If I can, milady."

"Sing me the rest of that song. The one you sang when we first met."

"What? Oh, yes, *The Unquiet Grave*. But you couldn't—"
"I would like to try again. Since you are fond of it. Please."
He hadn't brought his flute, but he sang low in the chilly light:

" ' 'Tis I, my love, sits on your grave
And will not let you sleep;
For I crave one kiss of your clay-cold lips
And that is all I seek.'

" 'You crave one kiss of my clay-cold lips;
But my breath smells earthy strong.
If you have one kiss of my clay-cold lips
Your time will not be long.' "

"No," said Elfavy. She gulped and hugged herself, seeking warmth. "I'm sorry."

He recalled again that there was no tragic art on Gwydion. None whatsoever. He wondered what a *Lear* or an *Agamemnon* or an *Old Men At Centauri* might do to her. Or the real thing, even: Vard of Helldale, rebelling for a family honor he didn't believe in, defeated and slain by his own comrades; young Brand who broke his regimental oath, gave up friends and wealth and the mistress he loved more than the sun, to go live in a peasant's hut and tend his insane wife.

He wondered if he, himself, was healthy enough within the skull to live on Gwydion.

The girl rubbed her eyes. "Best we go down again," she said dully. "Others will soon be awake. They won't know what has become of us."

"We'll talk later," said Raven. "When we aren't so tired."

"Of course," she said.

VII

RAIN CAME the following afternoon; first thunderheads banked over Kolumkill like blue-black granite, lightning livid in their caverns, then cataracts borne on a whooping east wind, finally a long slacking off when the Gwydiona romped nude on turf that glittered where sunbeams struck through the pillars of slowly falling water. Tolteca joined the ball game, as vigorous a one as he had ever played. Afterward they lounged about indoors, around a fire built on a hearth improvised from stones, and yarned. The men probed his recollections with an insatiable wish to learn more about the galaxy. They had tales to give in exchange, nothing of interhuman conflict—they seemed puzzled and troubled by that idea—but lusty enough, happenings of sea and forest and mountain.

"So we sat in that diving bell waiting to see if their grapple would find us before we ran out of air," Llyrdin said, "and I never played better chess in my life. It got right thick in there, too, before they snatched us up. They could have had the decency to be a few minutes longer about it, though. I had such a lovely end game planned out! But of course the board was upset as they hauled on the bell."

"And what might that symbolize?" Tolteca teased him.

Llyrdin shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not much of a thinker, myself. Maybe God likes a joke now and then. But if so, Vwi has a pawky sense of humor."

After the storm had passed, the party went on to the spaceport site. Tolteca put in a busy day and night investigating the area. It would serve admirably, he decided.

Though Bale time was drawing near and the Gwydiona were anxious to get home, Dawyd ordered a roundabout route. The rain had laid the volcanic dust, but more precipitation would be needed to purify the ground entirely. It would be foolish to retrace their path across that tainted soil. He aimed for a shoulder of the mountains which jutted out of the massif on the north, between the expedition and the coast. The pass across it rose above timberline, and travel was rugged. They stopped for some hours in the uppermost woods to rest before the final ascent. That was in the middle morning.

After he had eaten, Tolteca left camp to wash in a pool further down the stream which flowed nearby. Glacier-fed, the water numbed him, but after he had toweled himself he felt like a minor sun. He donned his clothes and wandered restlessly in search of a fall he could

hear in the distance. A game trail led through the brush toward its foot. He was about to emerge there when he heard voices. Raven and Elfavy!

"Please," the girl said. Her tone trembled. "I beg you, be reasonable."

The distress in her shocked Tolteca. For a moment of rage he wanted to burst forth and have it out with Raven. He checked himself. Eavesdropping was ungentlemanly. Even if—or perhaps especially because—those two had been so much in other's company since the first night in the Holy City. But if she was in some difficulty, he wanted to know about it so he could try to help her, and he didn't think she would tell him what the matter was if he put a direct question. There were cultural barriers, taboo or embarrassment, which only Raven was callous enough to hammer down.

Tolteca wet his lips. His palms grew sweaty and the pulse thuttered in his ears, nearly as loud as the stream that jumped over the bluff before him. *To chaos with being a gentleman*, he decided violently, slipped behind a natural hedge and peered through the leaves.

The water foamed down into a dell filled with young trees. Their foliage made a shifting pattern of light and shadow under the deep upland sky. Rainbows danced in the water smoke, currents swirled about rocks covered with soft green growth, the stones on the riverbed seemed to ripple. Cool and damp, the air rang with the noise of the fall. High overhead wheeled a single bird of prey.

Raven stood on the bank, a statue in a black traveling cloak. The harsh face might have been cast in metal as he regarded the girl. She kept twisting her own gaze away from his, and her fingers wrestled with each other. Tiny droplets caught in her hair broke the sunlight into flaming shards, but that unbound name was itself the brightest thing before Tolteca's eyes.

"I am being reasonable," Raven snapped. "When my nose is rubbed in something for the third time running, I don't ignore the smell."

"Third time? What do you mean? Why are you so angry today?"

Raven gave an elaborate sigh and ticked the points off on his fingers. "We've been over this ground before. First: your houses are built like fortresses. Yes, you tell me that's a symbol, but I have trouble believing that rational people like you would go to so much trouble and expense for something that was nothing but a symbol. Second: nobody lives alone any more, especially not in the wilderness. I can't forget that place where it was tried once. Those people

were killed with weapons. Third: while we were looking over the port site, your father made a remark about caves in the cliff being easily made into Bale time shelters. When I asked him what he had in mind, he suddenly discovered he had an urgent matter to attend to elsewhere. When I asked a couple of the others, they grew almost as unhappy as you and mumbled something about taking insurance against unforeseeable accidents.

"What tore it for me was when I pressed Cardwyr for a real explanation, a few hours ago on the march. He'd been so frank with me in every other respect that I felt he'd continue that way. But instead, he came as near losing his temper as I've ever seen a Gwydiona do. I thought for a minute he was going to hit me. But he just stalked off telling me to improve my manners.

"Something is wrong here. Why don't you give us fair warning?"

Elfavy turned as if to depart. She blinked very fast, and a wetness glinted on her cheek. "I thought you . . . you invited me to go for a walk," she said. "But—"

He caught her by the arm. "Listen," he said more gently. "Please listen. I'm picking on you now because, well, you've honored me with reason to think you won't lie or evade when something is really important to me. And this is. You've never seen violence, but I have. Much too often. I know what comes of it, and—I have to do what I can to keep it from you. Do you follow me? I have to."

She ceased pulling against him and stood shivering, her head bent so that the locks fell past her face and hid it. Raven studied her for a while. His mouth lost its hardness. "Sit down, my dear," he said at last.

Elfavy lowered herself to the ground as if strength had deserted her. He joined her and took one small hand in his. There went a stabbing through Tolteca.

"Are you forbidden to talk about this?" Raven asked, so low that the brawling of the fall nearly drowned the question.

She shook her head.

"Why won't you, then?"

"I—" Her fingers tightened around his palm, and she laid her other hand over it. He sat cat-passive while she gulped for breath. "I don't know. We don't—" Some seconds passed before she could get the words out. "We hardly ever talk about it. Or think about it. It's too dreadful."

There is such a thing as an unconscious taboo, Tolteca remembered through the tides in his brain, *laid by the self upon the self.*

"And it's not as if the bad things happen very often, now that . . . that we've learned how to take . . . precautions. Long ago it was worse—" She braced herself and looked squarely at him. "You live with greater hazards and horrors than ours, all the time, do you not?"

Raven smiled very slightly. "Ah-ah, there. I decline your counter-challenge. Let's stick to the main issue. Something occurs, or can occur, during Bale. That's plain to see. Your people must have wondered what, if they don't actually know."

"Yes. There have been ideas." Elfavy seemed to have recovered her nerve. She frowned at the earth for a space and then said almost coolly, "We are not much given on Gwydion to examining our own souls, as you from the stars seem to be. I suppose that is because we're simpler. Miguel said to me once that he would not have believed there could be an entire race so free of internal conflicts as us, until he came here." *She spoke my name!* "I don't know about that, but I do know that I've little skill in reading my own inmost thoughts. So I can't tell you with certainty why we so loathe to think about the danger at Bale time. However, might it not be that one hates to associate the most joyous moments of one's life with . . . with that other thing?"

"Might be," said Raven noncommittally.

She raised her head, tossing the tresses down her back, and went on. "Still, Bale is when God comes, and God has Vwi Night Faces too. Not everyone returns from the Holy City."

"What happens to them?"

"There is a theory that the mountain ape is driven mad by the nearness of God and comes down into the lowlands, killing and destroying. That would account for the facts. Actually, I suppose if you forced every person on Gwydion to give you an opinion, as you forced me, most would say this idea must be the right one."

"Haven't you tried to check up on it? Why not leave somebody behind in the towns, waiting in ambush, to see?"

"No. Who would forego his trip to the Holy City, for any reason?"

"Hm. One might at least leave automatic cameras. But I can find out about that later. What's this mountain ape like?"

"An omnivore, which often catches game to eat. They travel in flocks."

"I should think a closed door and a barred window would serve against animals. And don't you keep guard robots at your sanctuaries?"

"Well, the idea is that the beast may be half intelligent. How could it be found on so many islands, if it did not sometimes cross the water on a log?"

"That could happen accidentally. Or the islands may be the remnants of an original continent. There must at least have been land bridges now and then, here and there, in the geological past."

"Well, perhaps," she said reluctantly. "But suppose the mountain ape is cunning enough to get by a guard robot. That needn't happen very often, you see, to cause trouble. Suppose it has gotten to the point of using tools that can break and pry. I don't believe that anyone has ever really investigated its habits. It usually stays far out in the wilderness. Only communities which lie near the edge of a great forest, like Instar, ever glimpse a wandering flock. Remember, we are only ten million people scattered over a planet. It's too big for us to know everything."

She seemed entirely calm now. Her gaze went around the dell, up the tumbling river to the sky and the hunting bird. She smiled. "And it is right that the world be so," she said. "Would you want to live where there is no mystery and nothing unconquered?"

"No," Raven agreed. "I supose that's why men went to the stars in the first place."

"And must keep looking ever further, as they suck the planets dry," Elfavy said with compassion tinged by the least hint of scorn. "We keep the frontiers that we already have."

"I like that attitude," Raven said. "But I don't see any sense in letting an active menace run loose. We'll look into this mountain ape business, and if that turns out to be the trouble, we'll soon find ways to deal with the brutes."

Elfavy's mouth fell open. She stared at him in a blind fashion. "No," she gasped, "you wouldn't exterminate them!"

"Um-m . . . that's right, you'd consider that immoral, wouldn't you? Very well, let the species live. But it can be eradicated in inhabited areas."

"What?" She yanked her hands from his.

"Now, wait a bit," Raven protested. "I know you don't have any nonsense here about the sacredness of life. You fish and hunt and butcher domestic animals, not for sport but quite cheerfully for economic reasons. What's the difference in this case?"

"The apes may be intelligent!"

"On a very low plane, maybe. I wouldn't let that bother me. But if

you're squeamish, I suppose they could simply be stunned and airlifted en masse to a distant plateau or some place. I'm sure they wouldn't much mind."

"Stop." She raised herself to a crouch. Through the closefitting tunic, on the bare sun-gold arms and legs, Tolteca could see the tension that shook her. "Can you not understand? The Night Faces *must* be!"

"Brake back, there," Raven said. He reached for her. "I only suggested—"

"Let me alone!" She sprang to her feet and fled up the trail, almost brushing Tolteca but unaware of him in her weeping.

Raven swore, the word was less angry than hurt and bitter, and started to follow. *That's plenty,* Tolteca thought in a gust of temper, and stepped forth. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

Raven glided to a halt. "How long have you been listening?" he murmured in a tiger's voice.

"Long enough. I heard her ask you to let her be. So do it."

They confronted each other a little while. Shadow and sunlight speckled Raven's black shape. A breeze blew spray from the fall into Tolteca's face. He tasted it frigid on his lips, but a smell akin to blood was in his nostrils. *If he jumps me, I'll shoot. I will.*

Raven let out a deep breath. The heavy shoulders slumped noticeably. "I suppose that is best," he said, and turned around to stare at the river.

The swift end of the scene was like having a wall collapse on which Tolteca had been leaning. He knew with horror that his hand had been on his pistol butt, and snatched it away. *Ylem! What's happened to me?*

What would have happened, if–He needed his whole courage not to bolt.

Raven straightened. "Your chivalrous indignation does you credit," he said sarcastically, around the back of his head. "But I assure you I was only trying to keep her from getting murdered one fine festival night."

Still shaken, Tolteca grasped at the chance to smooth things over. "I know," he said. "But you have to respect the sensitivities of people. Different cultures have the damnedest geases."

"Uh-huh."

"Did you ever hear why trade with Orillion was abandoned, why nobody goes there any more? It seemed one of the most promising of the isolated worlds that we'd come upon. Honest, warmhearted

people. So warmhearted that we couldn't possibly deal with them if we kept on refusing their offers of individual friendship . . . which involved homosexual relations. We couldn't even explain to them why it wouldn't do."

"Yes, I've heard of that case."

"You can't go bursting into the most important parts of people's lives like an artillery shell. Such compulsions have their roots in the very bottom of the unconscious mind. The people themselves can't think logically about them. Suppose I cast doubts on your father's honor. You'd probably kill me. But if you said something like that to me, I wouldn't get resentful to the point of homicide."

Raven faced him again, cocking one brow upward. "What are your touchy points, then?" he asked dryly.

"Eh? Why, well—family, I guess, even if that relationship isn't as strong as for a Lochlanna. My planet. Democratic government. Not that I mind discussing any of those things, arguing about them. I don't believe in fighting till there's a direct physical threat. And I can entertain the possiblity that my notions are completely mistaken. Certainly there's nothing that can't be improved."

"The autonomous individual," Raven said. "I feel sorry for you."

He went on rapidly: "But there is something dangerous on Gwydion, especially at that so-called Bale season. I've learned that a certain animal, the mountain ape, is generally believed to be responsible. Do you have any information about the creature?"

"N-no. In most languages, 'ape' means a more or less anthropoid animal, fairly bright though without tools or a true speech. The type is common on terrestroid planets—paralled evolution."

"I know." Raven reached a decision. "Look here, you'll agree that action must be taken, for the safety of base personnel if nothing else. Later on we can worry about how to do it without offending local prejudices. But first we have to know what the practical problem is. Could the apes really be the destroyers? Elfavy was so irrational on the subject that I can't just take her word, or any Gwydiona's. I'll have to investigate for myself. You mentioned to me once that you've been on long hunting trips in the forests of several planets. And I suppose you are better than I at worming things out of people, especially when it involves their sore spots. So could you quiety find out what the spoor of the apes looks like, and so on? Then if we get a chance we can go off and have a look for ourselves. Agreed?"

VIII

THERE WERE NO signs until the party was over the pass and down in the woods on the opposite slope. But then young Beodag, who was a forester by trade, spotted the traces and pointed them out to Tolteca and Raven. The trail was fairly clear, trampled grass and broken twigs, caerdu trees stripped of their succulent buds, holes where tubers or rodentoids had been snatched out of the ground. "Be careful," he warned. "They have been known to attack men. You really ought to take a larger party."

Raven slapped the holster of his pistol. "This will handle more than one flock of anything," he said. "Especially with a clip of explosive bullets in it."

"And, uh, more people might only alarm them," Tolteca said. "Besides, you couldn't help us. We've both had encounters before now with animals on the verge of intelligence, not to mention fully developed nonhuman races. We know what signs to watch for. I'm afraid you Gwydiona don't, as yet."

Beodag looked a trifle skeptical but didn't press the point. It was assumed here that any adult knew what he was doing. Dawyd and his men had only been told that it was desirable to investigate the mountain apes, since protection against their raids might be needed at the spaceport. Elfavy, retreated into an unhappy silence, had not given Tolteca the lie.

"Well," Beodag said, "luck attend you. But I doubt you will discover much. At least, I have never seen them carrying anything like tools. I've merely heard third- and fourth-hand stories, and you know how they can grow in the telling."

Raven nodded, turned on his heel, and headed into the forest. Tolteca hurried to catch up. The sound of the others was soon left behind, and the outworlders walked through a stillness broken by rustlings and chirpings. The trees here grew tall, with sheer reddish trunks that broke into a dense roof of leaves high overhead. In that shade there was little underbrush, only a thick soft mould speckled with fungi. The air was warmer than usual at this altitude. It carried a pungent smell, reminding of thyme, sage, or savory.

"I wonder what makes that odor?" Tolteca said. He had his answer a few minutes later, when they crossed a meadow where lesser plants could grow. A thick stand of bushes had exploded into bloom, scarlet

flowers surrounded by bee-like insects, filling the area with their scent. He stopped for a close inspection.

"You know," he said, "I think this must be a rather near relative of baleflower. Observe the leaf structure. Evidently this species blooms a little earlier in the year, though."

"M-m, yes." Raven stopped and rubbed his chin. The cold green eyes grew thoughtful. "It occurs to me that the true baleflower should be opening its buds very soon after we get back to Instar—which is to say, just about in time for the Bale festival, whatever that is. In a culture like this, bearing in mind the like names, that's no coincidence. And yet they never seem to tell stories about the plant, the way they do about everything else in sight."

"I've noticed that," said Tolteca. "But we'd better not ask them bluntly why, not at least till we know more. When we return, I'm going to send our linguists into the ship's library to do an etymological and semantic study of that word *bale*."

"Good idea. While you're at it, dig up a bush sometime when nobody's looking and have it chemically analyzed."

"Very well," said Tolteca, though he winced at the implications.

"Meanwhile," said Raven, "we've another project. Let's go."

They re-entered the cathedral stillness of the forest. Their footfalls were muffled until their breathing seemed unnaturally loud. The trail of the ape band remained plain to see, prints in the ground, mutilated vegetation, excrement. "Pretty formidable animals, if they plow their way as openly as this," Raven remarked. "They're as sloppy as humans. I daresay they can move quietly when they hunt, however."

"Think we can get close enough to spy on them?" Tolteca asked.

"We can try. By all accounts, they have little shyness toward men. Certainly we can find some spot where they've stayed a few days and check the rubbish. You can tell if a bone was split with a rock, for instance, or if somebody has been chipping stone to shape."

"Suppose they do turn out to be what we're looking for? What then?"

"That depends. We can try to talk the Gwydiona out of their nonsensical attitude—"

"It isn't nonsense!" Tolteca protested indignantly. "Not in their own terms."

"It's always ridiculous to submit meekly to a threat," Raven said. "Stop being so tender with foolishness."

The memory rose in Tolteca of Elfavy's troubled face. "That's about

enough out of you," he rapped. "This isn't your planet. It isn't even your expedition. Keep your place, sir."

They halted. A flush darkened Raven's high cheekbones. "Keep a leash on that tongue of yours," he retorted.

"We're not here to exploit them. You'll damned well respect their ethos or I'll see you in irons!"

"What the chaos do you know about an ethos, you cultureless moneysniffer?"

"I know better than to—to drive a woman to tears. You'll stop that too, hear me?"

"Ah, so," said Raven most softly. "That's the layout, eh?"

Tolteca braced himself for a fight. It came from an unawaited quarter. Suddenly the air was full of shapes.

They dropped from the trees, onto the ground, and threw themselves at the men. Raven sprang aside and pulled his gun loose. His first shot missed. There was no second. A hairy body climbed onto his back and another seized his arm. He went down in a welter of them.

Tolteca yelled and ran. An ape laid hold of his trouser leg. He smashed the other boot into the animal's muzzle. The hands let go. Two more leaped at him. He dodged their charge and pelted over the ground. Get his back against yonder bole, spray them with automatic fire—He whirled and raised his pistol.

An ape cast a stone it had been carrying. The missile smacked Tolteca's temple. Pain blinded him. He lurched, and then they were on him. Thick arms dragged him to earth. His nose was full of their hair and rank smell. Fangs snapped yellow, a centimeter before his face. He struck out wildly. His fist rebounded from ridged muscle. The drubbing and clawing became his whole universe. He whirled into a redness that rang.

When he came to himself, a minute or two afterward, he was pinioned by two of them. A third approached, unwinding a thin vine from its waist. His arms were lashed behind his back.

He shook his head, which throbbed and stabbed him and dripped blood down on his tunic, and looked around. Raven had been secured in the same manner. The apes squatted to stare, or bounced about chattering. They numbered a dozen or so, all males, somewhat over a meter tall, tailed, heavybodied, covered with greenish fur and tawny manes. The faces were blunt, and they had four-fingered hands with fairly well-developed thumbs. Several carried bones of leg or jaw from large herbivores.

"Oa," Tolteca groaned. "Are you—are—"

"Not too much damaged yet," Raven said tightly, through brusied lips. Somehow he found a harsh chuckle. "But my pride! *They* were tracking *us*!"

An ape picked up one of the dropped pistols, fingered it, and tossed it aside. Others removed the men's daggers from the sheaths, but soon discarded them likewise. Hard hands plucked and prodded at Tolteca, ripped his garments with their curious pluckings. It came to him with a gulp of horror that he might well die here.

He fought down panic and tested his bonds. Wrist was lashed to wrist by a strand too tough to break. Raven lay in a more relaxed position on his back, squirming a little as the apes played with him.

The largest howled a syllable. The gang stopped their noise and got briskly to their feet. Though short of leg and long of toe, they were true bipeds. The humans were hauled up with casual brutality and the procession started off deeper into the woods.

Only then, as the daze cleared fully from him, did Tolteca realize that the bones his captors carried were weapons, club and sharp-toothed knife. "Proto-intelligent—" he began. The ape beside him cuffed him in the mouth. Evidently silence was the rule on the trail.

He didn't stumble long through his nightmare. They came out into another meadow, where an insolently brilliant sun spilled light across grasses and blossoms. The males broke into a yell, which was answered by a similar number of females and young. Those came swarming from their camping place under a great boulder. For a moment the mob seethed with hands and fangs. Tolteca thought he would be pulled apart alive. A couple of the biggest males knocked their dependents aside and dragged the prisoners to the rock.

There they were hurled down. Tolteca saw that he had landed near a pile of gnawed bones and other offal. Carrion insects made a black cloud above it. "Raven," he choked, "they're going to eat us."

"What else?" said the Lochlanna.

"Oa, can't we make a break?"

"Yes, I think so. I've been very clumsily tied. So have you, but I can reach my knot. If you can distract 'em another minute or two—"

Two males approached with clubs raised. The rest of the flock squatted down, instantly quiet again, watching from bright sunken eyes. The silence hammered at Tolteca.

He rolled over, jumped to his feet, and ran. The nearest male uttered a noise that might have been a laugh and pounced to intercept. Tolteca zigzagged from him. Another shaggy form rose in his path. The whole gang began to scream. A club whistled toward

Tolteca's pate. He threw himself forward, down across the wielder's knees. The blow missed and the ape fell on top of him. He buried his head under the body, shield against other weapons. But his feet were seized and he was dragged forth. He saw two clubbers tower across the sky above him.

Suddenly Raven was there. The Lochlanna chopped with the edge of his hand, straight across the throat of one ape. The creature moaned and crumpled; blood ran from the mouth, bluish red. Raven had already turned on the other. His arms shot forth, he drove his thumbs under the brows and hooked out the eyeballs in a single motion. A third male rushed him, to meet a hideously disabling kick. Even at that instant, Tolteca was a little sickened.

Raven stooped and tugged at his bonds. The apes milled about several meters off, enraged but daunted. "All right, you're free," Raven panted. "You have a pocket knife, don't you? Let me have it."

Several rocks thudded within centimeters as he got moving. He unclasped the blade on the run and charged the nearest stone-throwing ape, a female. She struck awkwardly at him. He sidestepped. His slash was a calculated piece of savagery. She lurched back yammering. Raven returned to Tolteca, gave him the knife again, and picked up a thighbone. "They're out of rocks," he said. "Now we back away very slowly. We want to persuade them we aren't worth chasing."

For the first few minutes it went well. He knocked aside a couple of flung clubs. The males snarled, barked, and circled about, but did not venture to rush. When the humans reached the edge of the meadow, though, fury overcame fear. The leader whirled his weapon over his head and scuttled toward them. The rest followed.

"Back against this tree!" Raven commanded. He hefted his thighbone like a sword. When the leader's club came down, he parried the blow and riposted with a bang across the knuckles. The ape wailed and dropped the club. Raven drove the end of his own into the opened mouth. There was a crunch of splintering palate.

Tolteca also had his hands full. The knife was only good for close-in work, and two of the beasts had assailed him at once. A sharp jawbone ripped across his shoulder. He ignored it, clinched, and stabbed deep. Blood spurted over him. He pushed the wounded creature against the other, which went down under the impact, then rose and fled.

The surviving males retreated, growling and chattering. Raven stooped, seized their dying leader, and threw him at them. The body

landed in the grass with a heavy thump. They edged back from it. "Let's go," Raven said.

They went, not too swifty, stopping often to turn about in a threatening way. But there was no pursuit. Raven gusted an enormous sigh. "We're clear," he husked. "Animals don't fight to a finish like men. And . . . we've provided them food."

Tolteca's throat tightened. When they came back to the guns, which meant final safety, a cramp gripped him. He knelt down and vomited.

Raven seated himself to rest. "That's no shame on you," he said. "Reaction. You did pretty well for an amateur."

"It's not fear," Tolteca said. He shuddered with the coldness that ran through him. "It's what happened back there. What you did."

"Eh? I got us loose. That's bad?"

"Your . . . tactics . . . Did you have to be so vicious?"

"I was simply being efficient, Miguel. Please don't think I enjoyed it."

"Oa, no. I'll give you that much. But—Oh, I don't know. What sort of a race do we belong to, anyway?" Tolteca covered his face.

After a while he recovered enough to say emptily, "This wouldn't have happened but for us. The Gwydiona give the apes a wide berth. There's room for all life on this planet. But we, we had to come blundering in."

Raven considered him for some time before asking, "Why do you think pain and death are so gruesome?"

"I'm not scared of them," Tolteca answered with a feeble flicker of resentment.

"I didn't say that. I was just thinking that down underneath, you don't feel they belong in life. I do. So do the Gwydiona." Raven climbed erect. "We'd better get back."

They limped toward the main trail. They had not quite reached it when Elfavy appeared with three bowmen and Kors.

She gasped and ran to meet them. Tolteca thought she might have been some wood nymph fleeing through the green arches. But though he looked much the gorier, it was Raven whom her hands seized. "What happened? Oh, I grew so worried—"

"We had trouble with the apes," Raven said. He urged her away from him, gently, with a rather sour smile. "Easy, there, milady. No great harm was done, but I'm a mess, and a bit too sore for embraces.

I wouldn't have done that, thought Tolteca desolately. Harsh-voiced, he related the incident.

Beodag whistled. "So they are on the verge of toolmaking! But I swear I've never observed that. I've never been attacked, either."

"And yet the bands you've met live a good deal closer to human settlement, don't they?" Raven asked.

Beodag nodded.

"That settles the matter," Raven declared. "Whatever the source of your trouble at Bale time, the mountain apes are not it."

"What? But if they have weapons—"

"*This* flock does. It must be far ahead of the others. Probably inbreeding of a mutation has made the local apes more intelligent than average. The others haven't even gotten to their stage, in spite of observing humans using implements, which I don't imagine these have ever done. And our friends here couldn't break into a house. A shinbone is no good as a crowbar. Besides they lack the persistence. They could have overcome us, and should have after the harm we did, but gave up. Anyhow, why would they want to plunder a building? Human artifacts mean nothing to them. They threw aside not only our guns but our daggers. We can forget about them."

The Gwydiona men looked uneasy. Elfavy's eyes blurred. "Can't you forget that obsession for one day?" she pleaded. "It could have been such a beautiful day for you."

"All right," Raven said wearily. "I'll think about medicine and bandages and a pot of tea instead. Satisfied?"

"Yes," she said. Her smile was shaky. "For now I am satisfied."

IX

FESTIVAL DWELT IN Instar. Tolteca was reminded of Carnival Week on Nuevamerica—not the commercialized feverishness of the cities, but masquerade and street dancing in the hinterlands, where folk still made their own pleasure. Oddly enough, for a people otherwise so ceremonious, the Gwydiona celebrated the time just before Bale by scrapping formality. Courtesy, honesty, nonviolence seemed too ingrained to lose. But men shouted and made horseplay, women dressed with a lavishness that would have been snickered at anytime else in the planet's long year, schools became playgrounds, each

formerly simple meal was a banquet, and quite a few families broke out the wine and got humanly drunk. A wreath of jule, roses, and pungent margwy herb hung on every door; no hour of day or night lacked music.

And so it was over this whole world, thought Tolteca: in every town on every inhabited island, the year had turned green and the people were soon bound for their shrines.

He came striding down a gravel path. The sun stood at late morning and the boy Byord walked with a hand in his. Far and holy above western forests, the mountain peaks dreamed.

"What did you do then?" asked Byord, breathless.

"We stayed in the City and had fun till it rained," said Tolteca. "Then when it was safe, we proceeded to our goal, looked it over—a fine site indeed—and at last came back here."

He didn't want to relate, or remember, the ugly episode in the forest. "Exactly when did we get back?"

"Day before yesterday."

"Uh, yes, now I place it. Hard to keep track of time here, when nobody pays much attention to clocks and everything is so pleasant."

"The City—gol! What's it like?"

"Don't you know?"

" 'Course not, 'cept they told my cousin a little about it in school. I wasn't born, last Bale. But I'm big enough already to go with my mother."

"The City is very beautiful," said Tolteca. He wondered how children as young as this fitted into a prolonged religious meditation, if that was what it was, and how they kept so well afterward the secret of what had happened.

Byord's mind sprang to another marvel. "Tell me 'bout planets, please. When I get big, I want to be a spaceman. Like you."

"Why not?" said Tolteca. Byord could get as good a scientific education here as anywhere in the known galaxy. By the time he was of an age to enroll, the astro academies on worlds like Nuevamerica would doubtless be eager to accept Gwydiona cadets. Gwydion itself would be more than a refueling stop, a decade hence. A people this gifted couldn't help themselves; they were certain to become curious about the universe (as if they weren't already so interested that only the intelligence of their questions made the number endurable)—and, yes, to influence it. The Empire had fallen, human society was once more in flux. What better ideal for the next civilization than Gwydion?

And why count myself out? thought Tolteca. *When we build our spaceports here–there'll soon be more than one–they'll require Namerican administrators, engineers, factors, liaison officers. Why shouldn't I become one, and live my life under Ynis and She?*

He glanced down at the tangled head beside him. He'd always shrunk from the idea of acquiring a ready-made family. But why not? Byord was a polite and talented boy who still remained very much a boy. It would be a pleasure to raise him. Even today's outing—undertaken frankly to ingratiate one Miguel Tolteca with Elfavy Simnon—had been a lot of fun.

When earlier, one of the Namerican spacemen had expressed a desire to settle here, Raven had warned him he'd go berserk in one standard year. But what did Raven know about it? The predicition was doubtless true for him. Lochlanna society, caste-ridden, haughty, ritualistic, and murderous, had nothing in common with Gwydion. *But Nuevamerica, now–Oh, I don't pretend I wouldn't miss the lights and tall buildings, theaters, bars, parties, excitement, once in a while. But what's to prevent me and my family from taking vacation trips there? As for our everyday lives, here are a calm, rational, but merry people with a really meaningful, implemented ideal of beauty, uncrowded in a nature which has never been trampled on. And not static, either. They have their scientific research, innovations in the arts, engineering projects. Look how they welcome the chance to have regular interstellar contact. How could I fail to fall in love with Gwydion?*

Specifically, with– Tolteca shut that thought off. He came from a civilization where all problems were practical problems. So let's not moon about, but rather take the indicated steps to get what we want. Raven had an inside track at the moment, but that needn't be too great a handicap, especially since Raven showed no signs of wanting to remain here. Since Byord was pestering him for yarns of other planets, Tolteca reminisced aloud, with some editing, and the rest of their walk passed quickly.

They entered the town. It seemed to have become queerly deserted in their absence. Where the dwellers had swarmed in the streets a few hours ago, they now were indoors. Here and there a man hurried from one place to another, carrying some burden, but that only emphasized the emptiness. However, though the air was quiet beneath the sun, one could hear an underlying murmur, voices behind walls.

Byord broke free of Tolteca's hand and skipped on the pavement. "We're going soon, we're going soon," he caroled.

"How do you know?" asked Tolteca. He had been told some while ago that there was no fixed date for Bale time.

Every freckle grinned. "I know, Adult Miguel! Aren't you comin' too?"

"I think I'd better stay and take care of your pets," said Tolteca. Byord maintained the usual small-boy zoo of bugs and amphibia.

"There's Granther! Hey, Granther!" Byord broke into a run. Dawyd, emerging from his house, braced himself. When the cyclone had struck him and been duly hugged, he pushed it toward the door.

"Go on inside, now," he said. "Your mother's making ready. She has to wash at least a few kilos of dirt off you, and pack your lunch, before we start."

"Thanks, Adult Miguel!" Byord whizzed through the entrance.

Dawyd chuckled. "I hope you aren't too exhausted," he said.

"Not at all," Tolteca answered. "I enjoyed it. We followed the river upstream to the House of the Philosophers. I never imagined a place devoted to abstract thinking would include picnic grounds and a carousel."

"Why not? Philosophers are human too, I'm told. It is refreshing for them to watch the children, romp with them . . . and perhaps a little respect for knowledge rubs off on the youngsters." Dawyd started down the street. "I have a job to do. Would you like to accompany me? You being a technical man, this may interest you."

Tolteca fell into step. "Are you leaving very soon, then?" he inquired.

"Yes. The signs have become clear, even to me. Older people are not so sensitive; the young adults have been wild this whole morning." Dawyd's eyes glittered. His lined brown face held less than its normal serenity.

"It is about ten hours on foot by the direct path to the Holy City," he added after a moment. "Less, of course, for a man unencumbered by children and the aged. If you should, yourself, feel the time upon you, I do hope you will follow and join us there."

Tolteca drew a long breath, as if to smell the tokens. The air was alive with the blooming of a hundred flowers, trees, bushes, vines; nectar-gathering insects droned in the sunlight. "What are the signs?" he asked. "No one has told me."

On other occasions, Dawyd, like the rest of his people, had grown a little uneasy at questions about Bale, and changed the subject—which was a simple task with so much to discuss, twelve hundred years of separate history. Now the physician laughed aloud. "I *can't* tell you," he said, "I know, that is all. How do buds know when to unfold?"

"But haven't you ever, in the rest of the year, made any scientific study of—"

"Here we are." Dawyd halted at the fused stone building in the center of town. It loomed square and bleak above them. The portal stood open and they entered, walking down cool shadowy halls. Another man passed, holding a wrench. Dawyd waved at him. "A technician," he explained, "making a final check on the central power controls. Everything vital, or potentially dangerous, is stored here during Bale. Motor vehicles in a garage at the end of yonder corridor, for instance. My duty—Here we are."

He swung aside a door which gave on a huge and sunny room, gaily painted walls lined with cribs and playpens. A mobile robot stoody by each, and a bright large machine murmured to itself in the center of the floor. Daywd walked around, observing. "This is a routine and rather nominal inspection," he said. "The engineers have already overhauled everything. As a physician, I have to certify that the environment is sanitary and pleasant, but that has never been a problem."

"What is it for?" Tolteca queried.

"Do you not know? Why, to care for infants, those too young to accompany us to the Holy City. Byord is about as young as we ever dare take them. The hospital wing of this building has robots to nurse the sick and the very old during Bale time, but that's not under my supervision." Dawyd snapped his fingers. "What in the name of chaos was I going to tell you? Oh, yes. In case you have not already been warned. This entire building is locked up during Bale. Automatic shock beams are fired at anything—or anyone—that approaches within ten meters. Any moving object that gets through to the outside wall is destroyed by flame blasts. Stay away from here!"

Tolteca stood quiet, for the last words had been alarmingly rough.

Finally he ventured, "Isn't that rather extreme?"

"Bale lasts about three Gwydiona days and nights," said Dawyd. He had fixed his stare on a pen and tossed the sentences over his shoulder. "That's more than ten standard days. Plus the time needed to walk to the Holy City and back. We don't take chances."

"But what is it you fear? What can happen?"

Dawyd said, not entirely steadily, but so far upborne by his own euphoria that he could at last speak plainly, "It is not uncommon that some of those who go to the Holy City do not come back. On returning, the other sometimes find that in spite of locks and shutters, there has been destruction wrought in town. So we put our important machines and our helpless members here, with mechanical attendants, in a place which nothing can enter till the time locks open automatically."

"I've gathered something like that," Tolteca breathed. "But have you any idea what causes the trouble?"

"We are not certain. The mountain apes are often blamed, but the experience you related to me does seem to absolve them. Conceivably, I don't know; conceivably we are not the only intelligent race on Gwydion. There could be true aborigines, so alien that we failed to recognize any trace of their culture. Various legends about creatures that live underground or skulk in the deep forests may have some basis in fact. I don't know. And it is never a good idea to theorize in advance of the data."

"Didn't you, or your ancestors, ever attempt to get data?"

"Yes, many times. Cameras and other recording devices were planted again and again. But they were always evaded, or discovered and smashed." Dawyd broke off short and continued his inspection in silence. He moved a little jerkily.

They were leaving the fortress before Tolteca suggested diffidently, "Perhaps we, from the ship, can observe what happens while you are gone."

Dawyd had calmed down again. "You are welcome to try," he said, "but I doubt you will have any success. You see, I don't expect the town will be entered. No such thing has happened for many years. Even in my own boyhood, a raid on a deserted community was a rare event. You must not believe this is a major problem for us. It was worse in the distant past, but nowadays it has so dwindled that there isn't even much incentive to study the problem."

Tolteca didn't think he would be unmotivated to look into the possibility of a native race on Gwydion. But he didn't wish to disturb his host further. He struck a cigarette as they walked on. The streets were now entirely bare save for Dawyd and himself. And yet the sun drenched them in light. It sharpened his feeling of eeriness.

"Actually, I'm afraid you will have a dull wait," said the older man. He was becoming more and more himself as the Namerican's questions receded in time. "Everybody gone, everything locked up, over

the whole inhabited planet. Maybe you would like to fly down to the southern hemisphere and explore a litte."

"I think we'll just stay put and correlate our findings" said Tolteca. "We have a lot. When you return—"

"We won't be worth much for a few days afterward," Dawyd warned him. "It isn't easy for mortal flesh, being God."

They reached his house. He stopped at the door, looking embarrassed. "I should invite you in, but—"

"I understand. Family rites." Tolteca smiled. "I'll stroll down to the park at town's end. You'll pass by there on your way, and I'll wave farewell."

"Thank you, far-friend."

The door closed. Tolteca stood a moment, inhaling deeply, before he ground the cigarette butt under his heel and walked off between shuttered walls.

X

THE PARK WAS gay with flowers. A few of the expedition lounged under shade trees, also waiting to observe the departure. Tolteca saw Raven, and clamped lips together. *I will not lose my temper.* He approached and gave greeting.

Raven answered with Lochlanna formality. The mercenary had put on full dress for the occasion, blouse, trousers, tooled leather boots, embroidered surcoat. He stood square, next to a baleflower bush as tall as himself. Its buds were opening in a riot of scarlet flowers. They smelled almost but not quite like the cousin species in the mountains, herbs, summer meadows, a phosphorus overtone, and something else that flitted half sensed below the surface of memory. The Siamese cat Zio nestled in Raven's arms; he stroked the beast with one hand and got a purr for answer.

Tolteca repeated Dawyd's warning about the fortress. Raven's dark head nodded. "I knew that. I'd do the same in their place."

"Yes, *you* would," said Tolteca. He remembered his resolution and added impersonally, "Such over-destructiveness doesn't seem characteristic of the Gwydiona, though."

"This isn't a characteristic season. Every five standard years, for about ten standard days, something happens to them. I'd feel easier if I knew what."

"My guess—" Tolteca paused. He hated to say it aloud. But finally: "A dionysiac religion."

"I can't swallow that," said Raven. "These people know about photosynthesis. They don't believe magical demonstrations make the earth fertile."

"They might employ such ceremonies anyhow, for some historical or psychological reason." Tolteca winced, thinking of Elfavy gasping drunken in the arms of man after man. But if he didn't say it himself, someone else would; and he was mature enough, he insisted, to accept a person on her own cultural terms. "Orgiastic."

"No," said Raven. "This is no more a dionysiac culture than yours or mine. Not at any time of year. Just put yourself in their place, and you'll see. That cool, reasonable, humorous mentality couldn't take a free-for-all seriously enough. Someone would be bound to start laughing and spoil the whole effect."

Tolteca looked at Raven with a sudden warmth for the man. "I believe you're right. I certainly want to believe it. But what do they do, then?" After a moment: "We have been more or less invited to join them, you realize. We could simply go watch."

"No. Best not. If you'll recall the terms in which that semi-invitation was couched, it was implicitly conditional on our feeling the same way as them—joining into the spirit of the festival, whatever that may mean. I don't think we could fake it. And by distracting them at such a time—more and more, I'm coming to think it's the focus of their whole culture—by doing that, we might lose their good will."

"M-m, yes, perhaps. . . . Wait! Perhaps we can join in. I mean, if it involves taking some drug. Probably a hallucinogen like mescaline, though something on the order of lysergic acid is possible too. Anyhow, couldn't Bale be founded on that? A lot of societies, you know, some of them fairly scientific, believe that their sacred drug reveals otherwise inaccessible truths."

Raven shook his head. "If that were so in this case," he answered, "they'd use the stuff oftener than once in five years. Nor would they be so vague about their religion. They'd either tell us plainly about the drug, or explain politely that we aren't initiates and it's none of our business what happens at the Holy City. Another argument against your idea is that they shun drugs so completely in their everyday life. They don't like the thought of anything antagonistic to

the normal functioning of body and mind. Do you know, this past day is the first instance I've seen or heard or read of any Gwydiona even getting high on alcohol?"

"Well," barked Tolteca in exasperation, "suppose you tell me what they do!"

"I wish I could." Raven's disquieted gaze went to the baleflower. "Has the chemical analysis of this been finished?"

"Yes, just a few hours ago. Nothing special was found."

"Nothing whatsoever?"

"Oa, well, its perfume does contain an indole, among other compounds, probably to attract pollinating insects. But it's a quite harmless indole. If you breathed it at an extremely high concentration—several thousand times what you could possibly encounter in the open air—I suppose you might get a little dizzy. But you couldn't get a real jag on."

Raven scowled. "And yet this bush is named for the festival. And alone on the whole inhabited planet, has no mythology."

"Xinguez and I threshed that out, after he'd checked his linguistic references. Bear in mind that Gwydiona stems from a rather archaic dialect of Anglic, closely related to the ancestral English. That word *bale* can mean several things, depending on ultimate derivation. It can signify a bundle; a fire, especially a funeral pyre; an evil or sorrow; and, more remotely and with a different spelling, *Baal* is an ancient word for a god."

Tolteca tapped a fresh cigarette on his thumbnail and struck it with an uneven motion across the heel of his shoe. "You can imagine how the Gwydiona could intertwine such multiple meanings," he continued. "What elaborate symbolisms are potentially here. Those flowers have long petals, aimed upward; a bush in full bloom looks rather like a fire, I imagine. The Burning Bush of primitive religion. Hence, maybe, the name *bale*. But that could also mean 'God' and 'evil.' And it blooms just at Bale time. So because of all these coincidences, the baleflower symbolizes the Night Faces, the destructive aspect of reality . . . probably the most cruel and violent phase thereof. Hence nobody talks about it. They shy away from creating the myths that are so obviously suggested. The Gwydiona don't deny that evil and sorrow exist, but neither do they go out of their way to contemplate the fact."

"I know," said Raven. "In that respect they're like Namericans." He failed to hide entirely the shade of contempt in the last word.

Tolteca heard, and flared. "In every other respect, too!" he snapped. "Including the fact that your bloody warlords are not going to carve up this planet!"

Raven looked directly at the engineer. So did Zio. It was disconcerting, for the cat's eyes were as cold and steady as the man's. "Are you quite certain," said Raven. "that these people are the same species as us?"

"Oa! If you think—your damned racialism—just because they're too civilized to brew war like you," Tolteca advanced with fists cocked. *If Elfavy could only see!* it begged through the boiling within him. *If she could hear what this animal really thinks of her!*

"Oh, quite possibly interbreeding is still feasible," said Raven. "We'll find that out soon enough."

Tolteca's control broke. His fist leaped forward of itself.

Raven threw up an arm—Zio scampered to his shoulder—and blocked the blow. His hand slid down to seize Tolteca's own forearm, his other hand got the Namerican's biceps, his foot scythed behind the ankles. Tolteca went on his back, pinned. The cat squalled and clawed at him.

"That isn't necessary, Zio." Raven let go. Several of his men hurried up. We waved them away. "It was nothing," he called. "I was only demonstrating a hold."

Kors looked dubious, but at that moment someone exclaimed, "Here they come!" and attention went to the road. Tolteca climbed back erect, too caught in a tide of anger, shame, and confusion to notice the parade much.

Not that there was a great deal to notice. The Instar folk walked with an easy, distance-devouring stride, in no particular order. They were lightly clad. Each carried the one lunch he would need on the way, some spare garments, and nothing else. But their chatter and laughter and singing were like a bird-flock, like sunlight on a wind-ruffled lake, and now and then one of the adults danced among the hurtling children. So they went past, a flurry of bright tunics, sunbrowned limbs, garlanded fair hair, into the hills and the Holy City.

But Elfavy broke from them. She ran to Raven, caught both the soldier's hands in her own, and cried, "Come with us! Can't you feel it, *liatha*?"

He watched her a long while, his features wooden, before he shook his head. "No. I'm sorry."

Tears blurred her eyes, and that wasn't the way of Gwydion either. "You can never be God, then?" Her head drooped, the yellow mane hid her face. Tolteca stood staring. What else could he do?

"If I might give you the power," said Elfavy. "I would give up my own." She sprang free, raised hands to the sun and shouted, "But it's impossible that you can't feel it! God is here already, everywhere, I see Vwi shining from you, Raven! You must come!"

He folded his hands together within the surcoat sleeves. "Will you stay here with me?" he asked.

"Always, always."

"Now, I mean. During Bale time."

"What? Oh—no, yes—you are joking?"

He said slowly, "I'm told the Night Faces are also revealed, sometimes, under the Steeps of Kolumkill. That not everyone comes home every year."

Elfavy took a backward step from him. "God is more than good," she pleaded. "God is *real.*"

"Yes. As real as death."

"Great ylem!" exploded Tolteca. "What do you expect, man? Everybody who can walk goes there. Some must have incipient disease, or weak hearts, or old arteries. The strain—"

Raven ignored him. "Is it a secret what happens, Elfavy?" he asked.

Her muscles untensed. Her merriment trilled forth. "No. It's only that words are such poor lame things. As I told you that night in the sanctuary."

In him, the grimness waxed. "Well, words can describe a few items, at least. Tell me what you can. What do you do there, with your physical body? What would a camera record?"

The blood drained from her face. She stood unmoving. Eventually, out of silence that grew and grew around her: "No. I can't."

"Or you mustn't?" Raven grabbed her bare shoulders so hard that his fingers sank in. She didn't seem to feel it. "You mustn't talk about Bale, or you won't, or you can't?" he roared. "Which is it? Quick, now!"

Tolteca tried to stir, but his bones seemed locked together. The Instar people danced by, too lost in their joy to pay attention. The other Namericans looked indignant, but Wildenvey had casually drawn his gun and grinned in their eyes. Elfavy shuddered. "I can't tell!" she gasped.

Raven's expression congealed. "You don't know," he said. "Is that why?"

"Let me go!"

He released her. She stumbled against the bush. A moment she crouched, the breath sobbing in and out of her. Then instantly, like a curtain descending, she fell back into her happiness. Tears still caught sunlight on her cheeks, but she looked at the bruises on her skin, laughed at them, sprang forward and kissed Raven on his unmoving lips. "Then wait for me, *liatha!*" She whirled, skipped off, and was lost in the throng.

Raven stood without stirring, gazing after them as they dwindled up the road. Tolteca would not have believed human flesh could stay immobile so long.

At last the Namerican said, through an acrid taste in his mouth, "Well, are you satisfied?"

"In a way." Raven remained motionless. His words fell flat.

"Don't make too many assumptions," said Tolteca. "She's in an abnormal state. Wait till she comes back and is herself again, before you get your hopes up."

"What?" Raven turned his head, blinking wearily. He seemed to recognize Tolteca only after a few seconds. "Oh. But you're wrong. That's not an abnormal state."

"Huh?"

"Your planet has seasons too. Do you consider spring fever a disease? Is it unnatural to feel brisk on a clear fall day?"

"What are you hinting at?"

"Never mind." Raven lifted his shoulders and let them fall, an old man's gesture. "Come, Sir Engineer, we may as well go back to the ship."

"But—Oa!" Tolteca's finger stabbed at the Lochlanna. "Do you mean you've guessed—"

"Yes. I may be wrong, of course. Come." Raven picked up Zio and became very busy making the cat comfortable in his sleeve.

"What?"

Raven started to go.

Tolteca caught him by the arm. Raven spun about. Briefly, the Lochlanna's face was drawn into such a fury that the Namerican fell back. Raven clapped a hand to his dagger and whispered, "Don't ever do that again."

Tolteca braced his sinews. "What's your idea?" he demanded. "If Bale really is dangerous—"

Raven leashed himself. "I see your thought," he said in a calmer tone. "You want to go up there and stand by to protect her, don't you?"

"Yes. Suppose they do lie around in a comatose state. Some animal might sneak past the guard robots and—"

"No. You will stay down here. Everybody will. That's a direct order under my authority as military commander." Raven's severity ebbed. He wet his lips, as if trying to summon courage. "Don't you see," he added, "this has been going on for more than a thousand years. By now they have evolved—not developed, but blindly evolved—a system which minimizes the hazard. *Most* of them survive. The ancestors alone know what delicate balance you may upset by blundering in there."

After another pause: "I've been through this sort of thing before. Sent out men according to the best possible plan, and then sat and waited, knowing that if I made any further attempt to help them I'd only throw askew the statistics of their survival. It's even harder to deal with God, Who can wear any face." He started trudging. "You'll stay here and sweat it out, like the rest of us."

Tolteca stared after him. Thought trickled into his consciousness. *The chaos I will.*

XI

RAVEN AWOKE more slowly than usual. He glanced at the clock. Death and plunder, had he been eleven hours asleep? Like a drugged man, too. He still felt tired. Perhaps that was because there had been evil dreams; he couldn't remember exactly what but they had left a scum of sadness in him. He swung his legs around and sat on the edge of the bunk, rested head in hands and tried to think. All he seemed able to do, though, was recall his father's castle, hawks nesting in the bell tower, himself about to ride forth on one of the horses they still used at home but pausing to look down the mountainside, fells and woods and the peasants' niggard fields, then everything hazed into blue hugeness. The wind had tasted of glaciers.

He pushed the orderly buzzer. Kors' big ugly nose came through the cabin door. "Tea," said Raven.

He scalded his mouth on it, but enough sluggishness departed him that he could will relaxation. His brain creaked into gear. It wasn't

wise, after all, simply to wait close-mouthed till the Instar people came home. He'd been too abrupt with Tolteca; but the man annoyed him, and besides, his revelation had been too shattering. Now he felt able to discuss it. Not that he wanted to. What right had a storeful of greasy Namerican merchants to such a truth? But it was certain to be discovered sometime, by some later expedition. Maybe a decent secrecy could be maintained, if an aristocrat made the first explanation.

Tolteca isn't a bad sort, he made himself admit. *Half the trouble between us was simply due to his being somewhat in love with Elfavy. That's not likely to last, once he's been told. So he'll be able to look at things objectively and, I hope, find an honorable course of action.*

Elfavy. Her image blotted out the recollection of gaunt Lochlanna. There hadn't much been said or done, overtly, between him and her. Both had been too shy of the consequences. But now—*I don't know. I just don't know.*

He got up and dressed in plain workaday clothes. Zio pattered after him as he left his cabin and went down a short passageway to Tolteca's. He punched the doorchime, but got no answer. Well, try the saloon. . . . Captain Utiel sat there with a cigar and an old letter; he became aware of Raven by stages. "No, Commandant," he replied to the question, "I haven't seen Sir Engineer Tolteca for, oh, two or three hours. He was going out to observe high tide from the diketop, he said, and wouldn't be back for some time. Is it urgent?"

The news was like a hammerblow. Raven held himself motionless before saying, "Possibly. Did he have anyone with him? Or any instruments that you noticed?"

"No. Just a lunch and his sidearm."

Bitterness uncoiled in Raven. "Did you seriously believe he was making a technical survey?"

"Why—well, I didn't really think about it. . . Well, he may simply have gone to admire the view. High tide is impressive, you know."

Raven glanced at his watch. "Won't be high tide for hours."

Utiel sat up straight. "What's the matter?"

Decision crystallized. "Listen carefully," said Raven. "I am going out too. Stand by to lift ship. Keep someone on the radio. If I don't return, or haven't sent instructions to the contrary, within—oh—thirty hours, go into orbit. In that event, and only in that event, one of my men will hand over to you a tape I've left in his care, with an explanation. Do you understand?"

Utiel rose. "I will not be treated in this fashion!" he protested.

"I didn't ask you that, Captain," said Raven. "I asked if you understood my orders."

Utiel grew rigid. "Yes, Commandant," he got out.

Raven went swiftly from the saloon. Once in the corridor, he ran. Kors, on guard outside his cabin, gaped at him. "Fetch Wildenvey," said Raven, passed inside and shut the door. He clipped a tape to his personal recorder, dictated, released it, and sealed the container with wax and his family signet ring. Only then did he stop to snatch some bites from a food concentrate bar.

Wildenvey entered as he was slipping a midget transceiver into his pocket. Raven gave him the tape, with instructions, and added, "See if you can find Miguel Tolteca anywhere about. Roust the whole company to help. If you do, call me on the radio and I'll head back."

"Where you going, sir?" asked Kors.

"Into the hills. I am not to be followed."

Kors curled his lip and spat between two long yellow teeth. The gob clanged on the disposer chute. "Very good, sir. Let's go."

"You stay here and take of my effects."

"Any obscene child of impropriety can do that, sir," said Kors, looking hurt.

Raven felt his own mouth drawn faintly upward. "As you will, then. But if ever you speak a word about this, I'll yank out your tongue with my bare fingers."

"Aye, sir." Kors opened a drawer and took out a couple of field belts, with supplies and extra ammunition in the pouches. Both men donned them.

Raven set Zio carefully on the bunk and stroked him under the chin. Zio purred. He tried to follow when they left. Raven pushed him back and closed the door in his face. Zio scolded him in absentia for several minutes.

Emerging from the spaceship, Raven saw that dusk was upon the land. The sky was deeply blue-black, early stars in the east, a last sunset cloud above the western mountains like a streak of clotting blood. He thought he could hear the sea bellow beyond the dike.

"We going far, Commandant?" asked Kors.

"Maybe as far as the Holy City."

"I'll break out a flitter, then."

"No, a vehicle would make matters worse than they already are. This'll be afoot. On the double.

"Holy muckballs!" Kors clipped a flashbeam to his belt and began jogging.

During the first hour they went through open fields. Here and there stood a barn or a shed, black under blackening heaven. They heard livestock low, and the whir of machinery tending empty farms. If no one ever came back, wondered Raven, how long would the robots continue their routines? How long would the cattle stay tame, the infants alive?

The road ended, the ground rose in waves, only a trail pierced the way among boles and brush. The Lochlanna halted for a breather. "You're chasing Tolteca, aren't you, Commandant?" asked Kors. "Shall I kill the son of a bitch when we catch him, or do you want to?"

"*If* we catch him," corrected Raven. "He has a long head start, even though we can travel a lot faster. No, don't shoot unless he resists arrest." He stopped a second, to underline what followed. "Don't shoot any Gwydiona. Under any circumstances whatsoever."

He fell silent, slumping against a tree in total muscular repose, trying to blank his mind. After ten minutes they resumed the march.

Trees and bushes walled either side of the trail, leaves made a low roof overhead. It was very dark; only the bobbing light of Kors' flash picked stones and dust into relief. Beyond the soft thud of their feet, they could hear rustlings, creakings, distant chirps and hoots and croaks, the cold tinkle of a brook. Once an animal screamed. The air cooled as they climbed, but it always remained mild, and it overflowed with odors. Raven thought he could distinguish the smells of earth and green growth, the damp smell of water when a rivulet crossed the trail, certain individual flower scents; but the rest was unfamiliar. Smell is the most evocative of the senses, and forgotten things seemed to move below Raven's awareness, but he couldn't identify them. Overriding all else was the clear brilliant odor of baleflower. In the past few hours, every bush had come to full bloom.

Seen by daylight, tomorrow, the land would look as if it burned.

Time faded. That was a trick you learned early, from the regimental bonzes who instructed noblemen's sons. You needed it, to survive the waiting and the waiting of war without your sanity cracking open. You turned off your conscious mind. Part of it might revive during pauses in the march. Surely it was hard to stop at the halfway point for a drink of water, a bit of field ration, and a rest, and not think about Elfavy. But the body had its own demands. The thing could be done, since it must.

The moon rose over Mount Granis. Passing an open patch of ground and looking downslope, Raven saw the whole world turned to silver treetops. Then the forest gulped him again.

Some eight or nine hours after departure, Kors halted with an oath. His flashbeam picked out a thing that scuttled on spiderlike legs, a steel carapace and arms ending in sword blades.

" 'S guts!" Raven heard a gun clank from a holster. The machine met the light with impersonal lens eyes, then slipped into the brush.

"Guard robot," said Raven. "Against carnivores. It won't attack humans. We're close now, so douse that flash and shut up."

He led the way, cat-cautious in darkness, thinking that Tolteca must indeed have beaten him here. Though probably not by very long. Maybe the situation could still be rescued. He topped the final steep climb and poised on the upped edge of the great amphitheater.

For a moment the moonlight blinded him. She hung gibbous over the Steeps, turning them bone color and drowning the stars. Then piece by piece Raven made out detail: mossy tiers curving downward to the floor, the ring of towers enclosing the square of the labyrinth, even the central fountain and its thin mercury-like jet. Even the gardens full of baleflower, though they looked black against all that slender white. He heard a mumble down in the forum, but couldn't see what went on. With great care he padded forward into the open.

"Hee-ee," said a man who sat on an upper terrace. "That's hollow, Bale-friend."

Raven stopped dead. Kors said something raw at his back. Slowly, Raven turned to face the man. It was Llyrdin, who had played chess in a diving bell and gone exploring for a spaceport in the mountains. Now he sat hugging his knees and grinning. There was blood on his mouth.

"It is, you know," he said. "Hollow. Hollow is God. I hail hollow, hollow hallow hullo."

Raven looked into the man's eyes, but the moonlight was so reflected from them that they stared blank. "Where did the blood come from?" he asked most quietly.

"She was empty," said Llyrdin. "Empty and so small. It wasn't good for her to grow up and be hollow. Was it? That much more nothing?" He rubbed his chin, regarded the wet fingers, and said plaintively, "The machines took her away. That wasn't fair. She was only a year and a half hollow."

Raven started down into the chalice.

"She came up about to my waist," said the voice behind him. "I think once, very long ago, before the hollow, I taught her to laugh. I even gave her a name once, and the name was Wormwood." Raven heard him begin to weep.

Kors took out his pistol, unsnapped the holster from his belt and clamped it on as a rifle stock. "Easy there," said Raven, not looking back but recognizing the noise. "You won't need that."

"The muck I won't," said Kors.

"We aren't going to fire on any Gwydiona. And I doubt if Tolteca will give trouble . . . now."

XII

THEY REACHED level sward and passed beneath a tower. Raven remembered it was the one he had climbed before. A child stood in the uppermost window, battering herself against the grille and uttering no sound.

Raven went through a colonnade. Just beyond, at the edge of the forum, some fifty Instar people were gathered, mostly men. Their clothes were torn, and even in the moonlight, across meters of distance, Raven could see unshaven chins.

Miguel Tolteca confronted them. "But Llyrdin killed that little girl!" the Namerican shouted. "He killed her with his hands and ran away wiping his mouth. And the robots took the body away. And you do nothing but stare!"

Beodag the forester trod forth. Awe blazed on his face. "Under She," he called, his voice rising and falling, with something of the remote quality of a voice heard through fever. "And She is the cold reflector of Ynis, and Ynis Burning Bush, though we taste the river. If the river gives light, O look how my shadow dances!"

"As Gonban danced for his mother," said the one next to him. "Which is joy, since man comes from darkness when he is born."

"Night Faces are Day Faces are God!"

"Dance, God!"

"Howl for God, Vwi burns!'

An old man turned to a young girl, knelt before her and said, "Give me your blessing, Mother." She touched his head with an infinite tenderness.

"But have you gone crazy?" wailed Tolteca.

It snarled in the crowd of them. Those who had begun to dance

stopped. A man with tangled graying hair advanced on Tolteca, who made a whimpering sound and retreated. Raven recognized Dawyd.

"What do you mean?" asked Dawyd. His tone was metal.

"I mean . . . I want to say . . . I don't understand—?

"No," said Dawyd. "What do you *mean?* What is your significance? Why are you here?

"T-t-to help—"

They began circling about, closing off Tolteca's retreat. He fumbled after his sidearm, but blindly, as if knowing how few he could shoot before they dragged him down.

"You wear the worst of the Night Faces," Dawyd groaned. "For it is no face at all. It is Chaos. Emptiness. Meaninglessness."

"Hollow," whispered the crowd. "Hollow, hollow, hollow."

Raven squared his shoulders. "Stick close and keep your mouth shut," he ordered Kors. He stepped from the colonnade shadows, into open moonlight, and approached the mob.

Someone on its fringe was first to see him: a big man, who turned with a bear's growl and shambled to meet the newcomers. Raven halted and let the Gwydiona walk into him. A crook-fingered hand swiped at his eyes. He evaded it, gave a judo twist, and sent the man spinning across the forum.

"He dances!" cried Raven from full lungs. "Dance with him!" He snatched a woman and whirled her away. She spun top fashion, trying to keep her balance. "Dance on the bridge from Yin to Yang!"

They didn't—quite. They stood quieter than it seemed possible men could stand. Tolteca's mouth fell open. His face was a moonlit lake of sweat. "Raven," he choked, "oa, ylem, Raven—"

"Shut up," muttered the Lochlanna. He edged next to the Nameri-can. "Stick by me. No sudden movements, and not a word."

Dawyd cringed. "I know you," he said. "You are my soul. And eaten with forever darkness and ever and no, no, no."

Raven raked his memory. He had heard so many myths, there must be one he could use . . . Yes, maybe. . . . His tones rolled out to fill the space within the labyrinth.

"Hearken to me. There was a time when the Sunsmith ran in the shape of a harbuck with silver horns. A hunter saw him and pursued him. They fled up a mountainside which was all begrown with crisflower, and wherever the harbuck's hoofs touched earth the cris-flower bloomed, but wherever the hunter ran it withered. And at last they came to the top of the mountain, whence a river of fire flowed down a sheer cliff. The chasm beyond was cold, and so misty

that the hunter could not see if it had another side. But the harbuck sprang out over the abyss, and sparks showered where his hoofs struck—"

He held himself as still as they, but his eyes flickered back and forth, and he saw in the moonlight how they began to ease. The tiniest thawing stirred within him. He was not sure he had grasped the complex symbolism of the myth he retold in any degree. Certainly he understood its meaning only vaguely. But it was the right story. It could be interpreted to fit this situation, and thus turn his escape into a dance, which would lead men back into those rites that had evolved out of uncounted manslayings.

Still talking, he backed off, step by infinitesimal step, as if survival possessed its own calculus. Kors drifted beside him, screening Tolteca's shivers from their eyes.

But they followed. And others began to come from the buildings, and from the towers after they had passed through the colonnade again. When Raven put his feet on the first upward tier, a thousand faces must have been turned to him. None said a word, but he could hear them breathing, a sound like the sea beyond Instar's dike.

And now the myth was ended. He climbed another step, and another, always meeting their upturned eyes. It seemed to him that She had grown more full since he descended into this vale. But it couldn't have taken that long. Could it?

Tolteca grasped his hand. The Namerican's fingers were like ice. Kors' voice would have been inaudible a meter away: "Can we keep on retreating, sir, or d'you think those geeks will rush us?"

"I wish I knew," Raven answered. Even then, he was angered at the word Kors used.

Dawyd spread his arms. "Dance the Sunsmith home!" he shouted.

The knowledge of victory went through Raven like a knife. Nothing but discipline kept him erect in his relief. He saw the crowd swirl outward, forming a series of interlocked rings, and he hissed to Kors, "We've made it, if we're careful. But we mustn't do anything to break their mood. We have to continue backing up slowly, waiting a while between every step, as they dance. If we disappear into the woods during the last measure, I think they'll be satisfied.

"What's happening?" The words grated in Tolteca's throat.

"Quiet, I told you!" Raven felt the man stagger against him. Well, he thought, it had been a vicious shock, especially for someone with no real training in death. Talk might keep Tolteca from collapse, and the dancers below—absorbed as children in the stately figure they

were treading—wouldn't be aware that the symbols above them whispered together.

"All right." Raven felt the rhythm of the dance indicate a backward step for him. He guided Tolteca with a hand to the elbow. "You came here with some idiotic notion of protecting Elfavy. What then?"

"I, I, I went down to . . . the plaza . . . They were—mumbling. It didn't make sense, it was ghastly—"

"Not so loud!"

"I saw Dawyd. Tried to talk to him. They all, all got more and more excited. Llyrdin's little daughter yelled and ran from me. He chased her and killed her. The cleaning robots s-s-simply carried off the body. They began . . . closing in on me—"

"I see. Now, steady. Another backward step. Halt." Raven froze in his tracks, for many heads turned his way. At this distance under the moon, they lacked faces. When their attention had drifted back to the dance, Raven breathed.

"It must be a mutation," he said. "Mutation and genetic drift, acting on a small initial population. Maybe, even if it sounds like a myth, that story of theirs is true, that they're descended from one man and two women. Anyhow, their metabolism changed. They're violently allergic to tobacco, for instance. This other change probably isn't much greater than that, in glandular terms. They may well still be interfertile with us, biologically speaking. Though culturally . . . no, I don't believe they are the same species. Not any more."

"Baleflower?" asked Tolteca. His tone was thin and shaky, like a hurt child's.

"Yes. You told me it emits an indole when it blooms. Not one that particularly affects the normal human biochemistry; but theirs isn't normal, and the stuff is chemically related to the substances associated with schizophrenia. *They* are susceptible. Every Gwydiona springtime, they go insane."

The soundless dance below jarred into a quicker, staccato beat. Raven used the chance to climb several tiers in a hurry.

"It's a wonder they survived the first few generations," he said when he must stop again. "Somehow, they did, and began the slow painful adaptation. Naturally, they don't remember the insane episodes. They don't dare. Would you? That's the underlying reason why they've never made a scientific investigation of Bale, or taken the preventive measures that look so obvious to us. Instead, they built a religion and a way of life around it. But only in the first flush of the season, when they still have rationality but feel the exuberance of

madness in their blood—only then are they even able to admit to themselves that they don't consciously know what happens. The rest of the time, they cover the truth with meaningless words about an ultimate reality.

"So their culture wasn't planned. It was worked out blindly, by trial and error, through centuries. And at last it reached a point where they do little damage to themselves in their lunacy.

"Remember, their psychology isn't truly human. You and I are mixtures, good, bad, and indifferent qualities; our conflicts have we always with us. But the Gwydiona seem to concentrate all their personal troubles into these few days. That's why there used to be so much destruction, before they stumbled into a routine that can cope with this phenomenon. That, I think, is why they're so utterly sane, so *good*, for most of the year. That's why they've never colonized the rest of the planet. They don't know the reason—population control is a transparent rationalization—but I know why: no baleflower. They're so well adapted that they can't do without it. I wonder what would happen to a Gwydiona deprived of his periodic dementia. I suspect it would be rather horrible.

"Their material organization protects them: strong buildings, no isolated homes, no firearms, no atomic energy, everything that might be harmed or harmful locked away for the duration of hell. This Holy City, and I suppose every one on the planet, is built like a warren, full of places to run and dodge and hide and lock yourself away when someone runs amok. The walls are padded, the ground is soft, it's hard to hurt yourself.

"But of course, the main bulwark is psychological. Myths, symbols, rites, so much a part of their lives that even in their madness they remember. Probably they remember more than in their sanity: things they dare not recall when conscious, the wild and tragic symbols, the Night Faces that aren't talked about. Slowly, over the generations and centuries, they've groped their way to a system which keeps their world somewhat orderly, somewhat meaningful, while the baleflower blooms. Which actually channels the mania, so that very few people get hurt any more; so they act out their hates and fears, dance them out, living their own myths . . . instead of clawing each other in the physical flesh."

The dance was losing pattern. It wouldn't end after all, Raven thought, but merely dissolve into aimlessness. Well, that would serve, if he could vanish and be forgotten.

He said to Tolteca, "You had to come bursting into their dream

universe and unbalance it. You killed that little girl."

"Oa, name of mercy." The engineer covered his face.

Raven sighed. "Forget it. Partly my fault. I should have told you at once what I surmised."

They were halfway up the terraces when someone broke through the dancers and came bounding toward them. Two, Raven saw, his heart gone hollow. The moonlight cascaded over their blonde hair, turning it to frost.

"Stop," called Elfavy, low and with laughter. "Stop, Ragan."

He wondered what sort of destiny the accidental likeness of his name to that of a myth would prove to be.

She paused a few steps below him. Byord clutched her hand, looking about from bright soulless eyes. Elfavy brushed a lock off her forehead, a gesture Raven remembered. "Here is the River Child, Ragan," she called. "And you are the rain. And I am the Mother, and darkness is in me."

Beyond her shoulder, he saw that others had heard. They were ceasing to dance, one by one, and staring up.

"Welcome, then," said Raven. "Go back to your home in the meadows, River Child. Take him home, Bird Maiden."

Byord's small face opened. He screamed.

"Don't eat me, mother!"

Elfavy bent down and embraced him. "No," she crooned, "oh, no, no, no. You shall come to me. Don't you recall it? I was in the ground, and rain fell on me and it was dark where I was. Come with me, River Child."

Byord shrieked and tried to break free. She dragged him on toward Raven. From the crowd below, a deep voice lifted, "And the earth drank the rain, and the rain was the earth, and the Mother was the Child and carried Ynis in her arms."

"Jingleballs!" muttered Kors. His scarecrow form slouched forward, to stand between his Commandant and those below. "That tears it."

"I'm afraid so," said Raven.

Dawyd sprang onto the lowest tier. His tone rang like a trumpet: "They came from the sky and violated the Mother! Can you hear the leaves weep?"

"Now what?" Tolteca glared at them, where they surged shadowed on the moon-gray turf. "What do they mean? It's a nightmare, it doesn't make sense!"

"Every nightmare makes sense," Raven answered. "The homicidal

urge is awake and looking for something to destroy. And it has just figured out what, too."

"The ship, huh?" Kors hefted his gun.

"Yes," said Raven. "Rainfall is a fertilization symbol. So what kind of symbol do you think a spaceship landing on your home soil and discharging its crew is? What would you do to a man who attacked your mother?"

"I hate to shoot those poor unarmed bastards," said Kors, "but—"

Raven snarled like an animal: "If you do, I'll kill you myself!"

He regained control and drew out his miniradio. "I told Utiel to lift ship thirty hours after I'd gone, but that won't be soon enough. I'll warn him now. There mustn't be any vessel there for them to assault. Then we'll see if we can save our own hides."

Elfavy reached him. She flung Byord at his feet, where the boy sobbed in his terror, not having sufficient mythic training to give pattern to that which stirred within him. Elfavy fixed her gaze wide upon Raven. "I know you," she gasped. "You sat on my grave once, and I couldn't sleep."

He thumbed the radio switch and put the box to his lips. Her fingernails gashed his hand, which opened in sheer reflex. She snatched the box and flung it from her, further than he would have believed a woman could throw. "No!" she shrilled. "Don't leave the darkness in me, Ragan! You woke me once!"

Kors started forward. "I'll get it," he said. Elfavy pulled his knife from its sheath as he passed and thrust it between his ribs. He sank on all fours, astonished in the moonlight.

Down below, a berserker howl broke loose as they saw what had happened. Dawyd shuffled to the radio, picked it up, gaped at it, tossed it back into the mob. They swallowed it as a whirlpool might.

Raven stooped down by Kors, cradling the helmeted head in his arms. The soldier bubbled blood. "Get started, Commandant. I'll hold 'em. He reached for his gun and took an unsteady aim.

"No." Raven snatched it from him. "We came to them."

"Horse apples," said Kors, and died.

Raven straightened. He handed Tolteca the gun and the dagger withdrawn from the body. A moment he hesitated, then added his own weapons. "On your way," he said. "You have to reach the ship before they do."

"You go!" Tolteca screamed. "I'll stay—"

"I'm trained in unarmed combat," said Raven. "I can hold them a good deal longer than you, clerk."

He stood thinking. Elfavy knelt beside him. She clasped his hand. Byord trembled at her feet.

"You might bear in mind next time," said Raven, "that a Lochlanna has obligations."

He gave Tolteca a shove. The Namerican drew a breath and ran.

"O the harbuck at the cliff's edge!" called Dawyd joyously. "The arrows of the sun are in him!" He went after Tolteca like a streak. Raven pulled loose from Elfavy, intercepted her father, and stiff-armed him. Dawyd rolled down the green steps, into the band of men that yelped. They tore him apart.

Raven went back to Elfavy. She still knelt, holding her son. He had never seen anything so gentle as her smile. "We're next," he said. "But you've time to get away. Run. Lock yourself in a tower room."

Her hair swirled about her shoulders with the gesture of negation. "Sing me the rest."

"You can save Byord too," he begged.

"It's such a beautiful song," said Elfavy.

Raven watched the people of Instar feasting. He hadn't much voice left, but he did his lame best.

> "—'Tis down in yonder garden green,
> Love, where we used to walk,
> The fairest flower that e'er was seen
> Is withered to a stalk.
>
> " 'The stalk is withered dry, my love;
> So will our hearts decay.
> So make yourself content, my love,
> Till God calls you away.' "

"Thank you, Ragan," said Elfavy.

"Will you go now?" he asked.

"I?" she said. "How could I? We are the Three."

He sat down beside her, and she leaned against him. His free hand stroked the boy's damp hair.

Presently the crowd uncoiled itself and lumbered up the steps. Raven arose. He moved away from Elfavy, who remained where she was. If he could hold their attention for half an hour or so—and with luck, he should be able to last that long—they might well forget about her. Then she would survive the night.

And not remember.

The Sharing of Flesh

I

MORU UNDERSTOOD about guns. At least the tall strangers had demonstrated to their guides what the things that each of them carried at his hip could do in a flash and a flameburst. But he did not realize that the small objects they often moved about in their hands, while talking in their own language, were audiovisual transmitters. Probably he thought they were fetishes.

Thus, when he killed Donli Sairn, he did so in full view of Donli's wife.

That was happenstance. Except for prearranged times at morning and evening of the planet's twenty-eight-hour day, the biologist, like his fellows, sent only to his computer. But because they had not been married long and were helplessly happy, Evalyth received his 'casts whenever she could get away from her own duties.

The coincidence that she was tuned in at that one moment was not great. There was little for her to do. As militech of the expedition—she being from a half barbaric part of Kraken where the sexes had equal opportunities to learn arts of combat suitable to primitive environments—she had overseen the building of a compound; and she kept the routines of guarding it under a close eye. However, the inhabitants of Lokon were as cooperative with the visitors from heaven as mutual mysteriousness allowed. Every instinct and experience assured Evalyth Sairn that their reticence masked nothing except awe, with perhaps a wistful hope of friendship. Captain Jonafer agreed. Her position having thus become rather a sinecure, she was trying to learn enough about Donli's work to be a useful assistant after he returned from the lowlands.

Also, a medical test had lately confirmed that she was pregnant. She wouldn't tell him, she decided, not yet, over all those hundreds of kilometers, but rather when they lay again together. Meanwhile,

the knowledge that they had begun a new life made him a lodestar to her.

On the afternoon of his death she entered the bio-lab whistling. Outside, sunlight struck fierce and brass-colored on dusty ground, on prefab shacks huddled about the boat which had brought everyone and everything down from the orbit where *New Dawn* circled, on the parked flitters and gravsleds that took men around the big island that was the only habitable land on this globe, on the men and the women themselves. Beyond the stockade, plumy treetops, a glimpse of mud-brick buildings, a murmur of voices and mutter of footfalls, a drift of bitter woodsmoke, showed that a town of several thousand people sprawled between here and Lake Zelo.

The bio-lab occupied more than half the structure where the Sairns lived. Comforts were few, when ships from a handful of cultures struggling back to civilization ranged across the ruins of empire. For Evalyth, though, it sufficed that this was their home. She was used to austerity anyway. One thing that had first attracted her to Donli, meeting him on Kraken, was the cheerfulness with which he, a man from Atheia, which was supposed to have retained or regained almost as many amenities as Old Earth knew in its glory, had accepted life in her gaunt grim country.

The gravity field here was 0.77 standard, less than two-thirds of what she had grown in. Her gait was easy through the clutter of apparatus and specimens. She was a big young woman, good-looking in the body, a shade too strong in the features for most men's taste outside her own folk. She had their blondness and, on legs and forearms, their intricate tattoos; the blaster at her waist had come down through many generations. Otherwise she had abandoned Krakener costume for the plain coveralls of the expedition.

How cool and dim the shack was! She sighed with pleasure, sat down, and activated the receiver. As the image formed, three-dimensional in the air, and Donli's voice spoke, her heart sprang a little.

"—appears to be descended from a clover."

The image was of plants with green trilobate leaves, scattered low among the reddish native pseudo-grasses. It swelled as Donli brought the transmitter near so that the computer might record details for later analysis. Evalyth frowned, trying to recall what . . . Oh, yes. Clover was another of those life forms that man had brought with him from Old Earth, to more planets than anyone now remem-

bered, before the Long Night fell. Often they were virtually unrecognizable; over thousands of years, evolution had fitted them to alien conditions, or mutation and genetic drift had acted on small initial populations in a nearly random fashion. No one on Kraken had known that pines and gulls and rhizobacteria were altered immigrants, until Donli's crew arrived and identified them. Not that he, or anybody from this part of the galaxy, had yet made it back to the mother world. But the Atheian data banks were packed with information, and so was Donli's dear curly head—

And there was his hand, huge in the field of view, gathering specimens. She wanted to kiss it. *Patience, patience,* the officer part of her reminded the bride. *We're here to work. We've discovered one more lost colony, the most wretched one so far, sunken back to utter primitivism. Our duty is to advise the Board whether a civilizing mission is worthwhile, or whether the slender resources that the Allied Planets can spare had better be used elsewhere, leaving these people in their misery for another two or three hundred years. To make an honest report, we must study them, their cultures, their world. That's why I'm in the barbarian highlands and he's down in the jungle among out-and-out savages.*

Please finish soon, darling.

She heard Donli speak in the lowland dialect. It was a debased form of Lokonese, which in turn was remotely descended from Anglic. The expedition's linguists had unraveled the language in a few intensive weeks. Then all personnel took a brainfeed in it. Nonetheless, she admired how quickly her man had become fluent in the woodsrunners' version, after mere days of conversation with them.

"Are we not coming to the place, Moru? You said the thing was close by our camp."

"We are nearly arrived, man-from-the-clouds."

A tiny alarm struck within Evalyth. What was going on? Donli hadn't left his companions to strike off alone with a native, had he? Rogar of Lokon had warned them to beware of treachery in those parts. But, to be sure, only yesterday the guides had rescued Haimie Fiell when he tumbled into a swift-running river . . . at some risk to themselves. . . .

The view bobbed as the transmitter swung in Donli's grasp. It made Evalyth a bit dizzy. From time to time, she got glimpses of the broader setting. Forest crowded about a game trail, rust-colored leafage, brown trunks and branches, shadows beyond, the occasional

harsh call of something unseen. She could practically feel the heat and dank weight of the atmosphere, smell the unpleasant pungencies. This world—which no longer had a name, except World, because the dwellers upon it had forgotten what the stars really were—was ill suited to colonization. The life it had spawned was often poisonous, always nutritionally deficient. With the help of species they had brought along, men survived marginally. The original settlers doubtless meant to improve matters. But then the breakdown came—evidence was that their single town had been missiled out of existence, a majority of the people with it—and resources were lacking to rebuild; the miracle was that anything human remained except bones.

"Now here, man-from-the-clouds."

The swaying scene grew steady. Silence hummed from jungle to cabin. "I do not see anything," Donli said at length.

"Follow me. I show."

Donli put his transmitter in the fork of a tree. It scanned him and Moru while they moved across a meadow. The guide looked childish beside the space traveler, barely up to his shoulder; an old child, though, near-naked body seamed with scars and lame in the right foot from some injury of the past, face wizened in a great black bush of hair and beard. He, who could not hunt but could only fish and trap to support his family, was even more impoverished than his fellows. He must have been happy indeed when the flitter landed near their village and the strangers offered fabulous trade goods for a week or two of being shown around the countryside. Donli had projected the image of Moru's straw hut for Evalyth—the pitiful new possessions, the woman already worn out with toil, the surviving sons who, at ages said to be about seven or eight, which would equal twelve or thirteen standard years, were shriveled gnomes.

Rogar seemed to declare—the Lokonese tongue was by no means perfectly understood yet—that the lowlanders would be less poor if they weren't such a vicious lot, tribe forever at war with tribe. *But really,* Evalyth thought, *what possible menace can they be?*

Moru's gear consisted of a loinstrap, a cord around his body for preparing snares, an obsidian knife, and a knapsack so woven and greased that it could hold liquids at need. The other men of his group, being able to pursue game and to win a share of booty by taking part in battles, were noticeably better off. They didn't look much different in

person, however. Without room for expansion, the island populace must be highly inbred.

The dwarfish man squatted, parting a shrub with his hands. "Here," he grunted, and stood up again.

Evalyth knew well the eagerness that kindled in Donli. Nevertheless he turned around, smiled straight into the transmitter, and said in Atheian: "Maybe you're watching, dearest. If so, I'd like to share this with you. It may be a bird's nest."

She remembered vaguely that the existence of birds would be an ecologically significant datum. What mattered was what he had just said to her. "Oh, yes, oh, yes!" she wanted to cry. But his group had only two receivers with them, and he wasn't carrying either.

She saw him kneel in the long, ill-colored vegetation. She saw him reach with the gentleness she also knew, into the shrub, easing its branches aside.

She saw Moru leap upon his back. The savage wrapped legs about Donli's middle. His left hand seized Donli's hair and pulled the head back. The knife flew back in his right.

Blood spurted from beneath Donli's jaw. He couldn't shout, not with his throat gaping open; he could only bubble and croak while Moru haggled the wound wider. He reached blindly for his gun. Moru dropped the knife and caught his arms; they rolled over in that embrace, Donli threshed and flopped in the spouting of his own blood. Moru hung on. The brush trembled around them and hid them, until Moru rose red and dripping, painted, panting, and Evalyth screamed into the transmitter beside her, into the universe, and she kept on screaming and fought them when they tried to take her away from the scene in the meadow where Moru went about his butcher's work, until something stung her with coolness and she toppled into the bottom of the universe whose stars had all gone out forever.

II

HAIMIE FIELL SAID THROUGH WHITE LIPS: "No, of course we didn't know till you alerted us. He and that—creature—were several kilometers from our camp. Why didn't you let us go after him right away?"

"Because of what we'd seen on the transmission," Captain Jonafer replied. "Sairn was irretrievably dead. You could've been ambushed, arrows in the back or something, pushing down those narrow trails. Best stay where you were, guarding each other, till we got a vehicle to you."

Fiell looked past the big gray-haired man, out the door of the command hut, to the stockade and the unpitying noon sky. "But what that little monster was doing meanwhile—" Abruptly he closed his mouth.

With equal haste, Jonafer said: "The other guides ran away, you have told me, as soon as they sensed you were angry. I've just had a report from Kallaman. His team flitted to the village. It's deserted. The whole tribe's pulled up stakes. Afraid of our revenge, evidently. Though it's no large chore to move, when you can carry your household goods on your back and weave a new house in a day."

Evalyth leaned forward. "Stop evading me," she said. "What did Moru do with Donli that you might have prevented if you'd arrived in time?"

Fiell continued to look past her. Sweat gleamed in droplets on his forehead. "Nothing, really," he mumbled. "Nothing that mattered . . . once the murder itself had been committed."

"I meant to ask you what kind of services you want for him, Lieutenant Sairn," Jonafer said to her. "Should the ashes be buried here, or scattered in space after we leave, or brought home?"

Evalyth turned her gaze full upon him. "I never authorized that he be cremated, Captain," she said slowly.

"No, but—Well, be realistic. You were first under anesthesia, then heavy sedation, while we recovered the body. Time had passed. We've no facilities for, um, cosmetic repair, nor any extra refrigeration space, and in this heat—"

Since she had been let out of sickbay, there had been a kind of numbness in Evalyth. She could not entirely comprehend the fact that Donli was gone. It seemed as if at any instant yonder doorway would fill with him, sunlight across his shoulders, and he would call to

her, laughing, and console her for a meaningless nightmare she had had. That was the effect of the psycho-drugs, she knew and damned the kindliness of the medic.

She felt almost glad to feel a slow rising anger. It meant the drugs were wearing off. By evening she would be able to weep.

"Captain," she said, "I saw him killed. I've seen deaths before, some of them quite messy. We do not mask the truth on Kraken. You've cheated me of my right to lay my man out and close his eyes. You will not cheat me of my right to obtain justice. I demand to know exactly what happened."

Jonafer's fists knotted on his desktop. "I can hardly stand to tell you."

"But you shall, Captain."

"All right! All right!" Jonafer shouted. The words leaped out like bullets. "We saw the thing transmitted. He stripped Donli, hung him up by the heels from a tree, bled him into that knapsack. He cut off the genitals and threw them in with the blood. He opened the body and took heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, thyroid prostate, pancreas, and loaded them up too, and ran off into the woods. Do you wonder why we didn't let you see what was left?"

"The Lokonese warned us against the jungle dwellers," Fiell said dully. "We should have listened. But they seemed like pathetic dwarfs. And they did rescue me from the river. When Donli asked about the birds—described them, you know, and asked if anything like that was known—Moru said yes, but they were rare and shy; our gang would scare them off; but if one man would come along with him, he could find a nest and they might see the bird. A house he called it, but Donli thought he meant a nest. Or so he told us. It'd been a talk with Moru when they happened to be a ways offside, in sight but out of earshot. Maybe that should have alerted us, maybe we should have asked the other tribesmen. But we did not see any reason to—I mean, Donli was bigger, stronger, armed with a blaster. What savage would dare attack him? And anyway, they *had* been friendly, downright frolicsome after they got over their initial fear of us, and they'd shown as much eagerness for further contact as anybody here in Lokon has, and—" His voice trailed off.

"Did he steal tools or weapons?" Evalyth asked.

"No," Jonafer said. "I have everything your husband was carrying, ready to give you."

Fiell said: "I don't think it was an act of hatred. Moru must have had some superstitious reason."

Jonafer nodded. "We can't judge him by our standards."

"By whose, then?" Evalyth retorted. Supertranquilizer or no, she was surprised at the evenness of her own tone. "I'm from Kraken, remember. I'll not let Donli's child be born and grow up knowing he was murdered and no one tried to do justice for him."

"You can't take revenge on an entire tribe," Jonafer said.

"I don't mean to. But, Captain, the personnel of this expedition are from several different planets each with its characteristic societies. The articles specifically state that the essential mores of every member shall be respected. I want to be relieved of my regular duties until I have arrested the killer of my husband and done justice upon him."

Jonafer bent his head. "I have to grant that," he said low.

Evalyth rose. "Thank you, gentlemen," she said. "If you will excuse me, I'll commence my investigation at once."

—While she was still a machine, before the drugs wore off.

II

IN THE DRIER, COOLER UPLANDS, agriculture had remained possible after the colony otherwise lost civilization. Fields and orchards, painstakingly cultivated with neolithic tools, supported a scattering of villages and the capital town Lokon.

Its people bore a family resemblance to the forest dwellers. Few settlers indeed could have survived to become the ancestors of this world's humanity. But the highlanders were better nourished, bigger, straighter. They wore gaily dyed tunics and sandals. The well-to-do added jewelry of gold and silver. Hair was braided, chins kept shaven. Folk walked boldly, without the savages' constant fear of ambush, and talked merrily.

To be sure, this was only strictly true of the free. While *New Dawn's* anthropologists had scarcely begun to unravel the ins and outs of the culture, it had been obvious from the first that Lokon kept a large slave class. Some were sleek household servants. More toiled meek and naked in the fields, the quarries, the mines, under the lash of overseers and the guard of soldiers whose spearheads and swords

were of ancient Imperial metal. But none of the space travelers was unduly shocked. They had seen worse elsewhere. Historical data banks described places in olden time called Athens, India, America.

Evalyth strode down twisted, dusty streets, between the gaudily painted walls of cubical, windowless adobe houses. Commoners going about their tasks made respectful salutes. Although no one feared any longer that the strangers meant harm, she did tower above the tallest man, her hair was colored like metal and her eyes like the sky, she bore lightning at her waist and none knew what other godlike powers.

Today soldiers and noblemen also genuflected, while slaves went on their faces. Where she appeared, the chatter and clatter of everyday life vanished; the business of the market plaza halted when she passed the booths; children ceased their games and fled; she moved in silence akin to the silence in her soul. Under the sun and the snowcone of Mount Burus, horror brooded. For by now Lokon knew that a man from the stars had been slain by a lowland brute; and what would come of that?

Word must have gone ahead to Rogar, through, since he awaited her in his house by Lake Zelo next to the Sacred Place. He was not king or council president or high priest, but he was something of all three, and it was he who dealt most with the strangers.

His dwelling was the usual kind, larger than average but dwarfed by the adjacent walls. Those enclosed a hugh compound, filled with buildings, where none of the outworlders had been admitted. Guards in scarlet robes and grotesquely carved wooden helmets stood always at its gates. Today their number was doubled, and others flanked Rogar's door. The lake shone like polished steel at their backs. The trees along the shore looked equally rigid.

Rogar's major-domo, a fat elderly slave, prostrated himself in the entrance as Evalyth neared. "If the heaven-borne will deign to follow this unworthy one, *Klev* Rogar is within—" The guards dipped their spears to her. Their eyes were wide and frightened.

Like the other houses, this turned inward. Rogar sat on a dais in a room opening on a courtyard. It seemed doubly cool and dim by contrast with the glare outside. She could scarcely discern the frescos on the walls or the patterns on the carpet; they were crude art anyway. Her attention focused on Rogar. He did not rise, that not being a sign of respect here. Instead, he bowed his grizzled head above folded hands. The major-domo offered her a bench, and

Rogar's chief wife set a bombilla of herb tea by her before vanishing.

"Be greeted, *Klev*," Evalyth said formally.

"Be greeted, heaven-borne." Alone now, shadowed from the cruel sun, they observed a ritual period of silence.

Then: "This is terrible what has happened, heaven-borne," Rogar said. "Perhaps you do not know that my white robe and bare feet signify mourning as for one of my own blood."

"That is well done," Evalyth said. "We shall remember."

The man's dignity faltered. "You understand that none of us had anything to do with the evil, do you not? The savages are our enemies too. They are vermin. Our ancestors caught some and made them slaves, but they are good for nothing else. I warned your friends not to go down among those we have not tamed."

"Their wish was to do so," Evalyth replied. "Now my wish is to get revenge for my man." She didn't know if this language included a word for justice. No matter. Because of the drugs, which heightened the logical faculties while they muffled the emotions, she was speaking Lokonese quite well enough for her purposes.

"We can get soldiers and help you kill as many as you choose," Rogar offered.

"Not needful. With this weapon at my side I alone can destroy more than your army might. I want your counsel and help in a different matter. How can I find him who slew my man?"

Roger frowned. "The savages can vanish into trackless jungles, heaven-borne."

"Can they vanish from other savages, though?"

"Ah! Shrewdly thought, heaven-borne. Those tribes are endlessly at each other's throats. If we can make contact with one, its hunters will soon learn for you where the killer's people have taken themselves." His scowl deepened. "But he must have gone from them, to hide until you have departed our land. A single man might be impossible to find. Lowlanders are good at hiding, of necessity."

"What do you mean by necessity?"

Rogar showed surprise at her failure to grasp what was obvious to him. "Why, consider a man out hunting," he said. "He cannot go with companions after every kind of game, or the noise and scent would frighten it away. So he is often alone in the jungle. Someone from another tribe may well set upon him. A man stalked and killed is just as useful as one slain in open war."

"Why this incessant fighting?"

Rogar's look of bafflement grew stronger. "How else shall they get human flesh?"

"But they do not live on that!"

"No, surely not, except as needed. But that need comes many times as you know. Their wars are their chief way of taking men; booty is good too, but not the main reason to fight. He who slays, owns the corpse, and naturally divides it solely among his close kin. Not everyone is lucky in battle. Therefore these who did not chance to kill in a war may well go hunting on their own, two or three of them together hoping to find a single man from a different tribe. And that is why a lowlander is good at hiding."

Evalyth did not move or speak. Rogar drew a long breath and continued trying to explain: "Heaven-borne, when I heard the evil news, I spoke long with men from your company. They told me what they had seen from afar by the wonderful means you command. Thus it is clear to me what happened. This guide—what is his name? Yes, Moru—he is a cripple. He had no hope of killing himself a man except by treachery. When he saw that chance, he took it."

He ventured a smile. "That would never happen in the highlands," he declared. "We do not fight wars, save when we are attacked, nor do we hunt our fellowmen as if they were animals. Like yours, ours is a civilized race." His lips drew back from startlingly white teeth. "But, heaven-borne, your man was slain. I propose we take vengeance, not simply on the killer if we catch him, but on his tribe, which we can certainly find as you suggested. That will teach all the savages to beware of their betters. Afterward we can share the flesh, half to your people, half to mine."

Evalyth could only know an intellectual astonishment. Yet She had the feeling somehow of having walked off a cliff. She stared through the shadows, into the grave old face, and after a long time she heard herself whisper: "You . . . also . . . here . . . eat men?"

"Slaves," Rogar said. "No more than required. One of them will do for four boys."

Her hand dropped to her gun. Rogar sprang up in alarm. "Heaven-borne," he exclaimed, "I told you we are civilized. Never fear attack from any of us! We—we—"

She rose too, high above him. Did he read judgment in her gaze? Was the terror that snatchhim on behalf of his whole people? He cowered from her, sweating and shuddering. "Heaven-borne, believe me, you have no quarrel with Lokon—no, now, let me show

you, let me take you into the Sacred Place, even if you are no initiate . . . for surely you are akin to the gods, surely the gods will not be offended—Come, let me show you how it is, let me prove we have no will and no *need* to be your enemies—"

There was the gate that Rogar opened for her in that massive wall. There were the shocked countenances of the guards and loud promises of many sacrifices to appease the Powers. There was the stone pavement beyond, hot and hollowly resounding underfoot. There were the idols grinning around a central temple. There was the house of the acolytes who did the work and who shrank in fear when they saw their master conduct a foreigner in. There were the slave barracks.

"See, heaven-borne, they are well treated, are they not? We do have to crush their hands and feet when we choose them as children for this service. Think how dangerous it would be otherwise, hundreds of boys and young men in here. But we treat them kindly unless they misbehave. Are they not fat? Their own Holy Food is especially honorable, bodies of men of all degree who have died in their full strength. We teach them that they will live on in those for whom they are slain. Most are content with that, believe me, heaven-borne. Ask them yourself . . . though remember, they grow dull-witted, with nothing to do year after year. We slay them quickly, cleanly, at the beginning of each summer—no more than we must for that year's crop of boys entering into manhood, one slave for four boys, no more than that. And it is a most beautiful rite, with days of feasting and merrymaking afterward. Do you understand now, heaven-borne? You have nothing to fear from us. We are not savages, warring and raiding and shulking to get our man-flesh. We are civilized—not godlike in your fashion, no, I dare not claim that, do not be angry—but civilized—surely worthy of your friendship, are we not? Are we not, heaven-borne?"

IV

CHENA DARNARD, who headed the cultural anthropology team, told her computer to scan its data bank. Like the others, it was a portable, its memory housed in *New Dawn*. At the moment the spaceship was above the opposite hemisphere, and perceptible time passed while beams went back and forth along the strungout relay units.

Chena leaned back and studied Evalyth across her desk. The Krakener girl sat so quietly. It seemed unnatural, despite the drugs in her bloodstream retaining some power. To be sure, Evalyth was of aristocratic descent in a warlike society. Furthermore, hereditary psychological differences might exist on the different worlds. Not much was known about that, apart from extreme cases like Gwydion—or this planet? Regardless, Chena thought, it would be better if Evalyth gave way to simple shock and grief.

"Are you quite certain of your facts, dear?" the anthropologist asked as gently as possible. "I mean, while this island alone is habitable, it's large, the topography is rugged, communications are primitive, my group has already identified scores of distinct cultures."

"I questioned Rogar for more than an hour," Evalyth replied in the same flat voice, looking out of the same flat eyes as before. "I know interrogation techniques and he was badly rattled. He talked.

"The Lokonese themselves are not as backward as their technology. They've lived for centuries with savages threatening their borderlands. It's made them develop a good intelligence network. Rogar described its functioning to me in detail. It can't help but keep them reasonably well informed about everything that goes on. And, while tribal customs do vary tremendously, the cannibalism is universal. That is why none of the Lokonese thought to mention it to us. They took for granted that we had our own ways of providing human meat.

"People have, m-m-m, latitude in those methods?"

"Oh, yes. Here they breed slaves for the purpose. But most lowlanders have too skimpy an economy for that. Some of them use war and murder. Among others, they settle it within the tribe by annual combats. Or—Who cares? The fact is that, everywhere in this country, in whatever fashion it may be, the boys undergo a puberty rite that involves eating an adult male."

Chena bit her lip. "What in the name of chaos might have started it? Computer! Have you scanned?"

"Yes," said the machine voice out of the case on her desk. "Data on cannibalism in man are comparatively sparse, because it is a rarity. On all planets hitherto known to us it is banned and has been throughout their history, although it is sometimes considered forgiveable as an emergency measure when no alternative means of preserving life is available. Very limited forms of what might be called ceremonial cannibalism have occurred, as for example the drinking of minute amounts of each other's blood in pledging oath brotherhood among the Falkens of Lochlanna—"

"Never mind that," Chena said. A tautness in her throat thickened her tone. "Only here, it seems, have they degenerated so far that—Or is it degeneracy? Reversion, perhaps? What about Old Earth?"

"Information is fragmentary. Aside from what was lost during the Long Night, knowledge is under the handicap that the last primitive societies there vanished before interstellar travel began. But certain data collected by ancient historians and scientists remain.

"Cannibalism was an occasional part of human sacrifice. As a rule, victims were left uneaten. But in a minority of religions, the bodies, or selected portions of them, were consumed, either by a special class, or by the community as a whole. Generally this was regarded as theophagy. Thus, the Aztecs of Mexico offered thousands of individuals annually to their gods. The requirement of doing this forced them to provoke wars and rebellions, which in turn made it easy for the eventual European conqueror to get native allies. The majority of prisoners were simply slaughtered, their hearts given directly to the idols. But in at least one cult the body was divided among the worshippers.

"Cannibalism could be a form of magic, too. By eating a person, one supposedly acquired his virtues. This was the principal motive of the cannibals of Africa and Polynesia. Contemporary observers did report that the meals were relished, but that is easy to understand, expecially in protein-poor areas.

"The sole recorded instance of systematic non-ceremonial cannibalism was among the Carib Indians of America. They ate man because they preferred man. They were especially fond of babies and used to capture women from their tribes for breeding stock. Male children of these slaves were generally gelded to make them docile and tender. In large part because of strong aversion to such practices, the Europeans exterminated the Caribs to the last man."

The report stopped. Chena grimaced. "I can sympathize with the Europeans," she said.

Evalyth might once have raised her brows; but her face stayed as wooden as her speech. "Aren't you supposed to be an objective scientist?"

"Yes. Yes. Still, there is such a thing as value judgment. And they did kill Donli."

"Not they. One of them. I shall find him."

"He's nothing but a creature of his culture, dear, sick with his whole race." Chena drew a breath, struggling for calm. "Obviously, the sickness has become a behavioral basic," she said. "I daresay it originated in Lokon. Cultural radiation is practically always from the more to the less advanced peoples. And on a single island, after centuries, no tribe has escaped the infection. The Lokonese later elaborated and rationalized the practice. The savages left its cruelty naked. But highlander or lowlander, their way of life is founded on that particular human sacrifice."

"Can they be taught differently?" Evalyth asked without real interest.

"Yes. In time. In theory. But—well, I do know enough about what happened on Old Earth, and elsewhere, when advanced societies undertook to reform primitive ones. The entire structure was destroyed. It had to be.

"Think of the result, if we told these people to desist from their puberty rite. They wouldn't listen. They couldn't. They must have grandchildren. They know a boy won't become a man unless he has eaten part of a man. We'd have to conquer them, kill most, make sullen prisoners of the rest. And when the next crop of boys did in fact mature without the magic food . . . what then? Can you imagine the demoralization, the sense of utter inferiority, the loss of that tradition which is the core of every personal identity? It might be kinder to bomb this island sterile."

Chena shook her head. "No" she said harshly, "the single decent way for us to proceed would be gradually. We could send missionaries. By their precept and example, we could start the natives phasing out their custom after two or three generations . . . And we can't afford such an effort. Not for a long time to come. Not with so many worlds in the galaxy, so much worthier of what little help we can give. I am going to recommend this planet be left alone."

Evalyth considered her for a moment before asking: "Isn't that partly because of your own reaction?"

"Yes," Chena admitted. "I cannot overcome my disgust. And I, as you pointed out, am supposed to be professionally broad-minded. So

even if the Board tried to recruit missionaries, I doubt if they'd succeed." She hesitated. "You yourself, Evalyth—"

The Krakener rose. "My emotions don't matter," she said. "My duty does. Thank you for your help." She turned on her heel and went with military strides out of the cabin.

V

THE CHEMICAL BARRIERS were crumbling. Evalyth stood for a moment before the little building that had been hers and Donli's, afraid to enter. The sun was low, so that the compound was filling with shadows. A thing leathery-winged and serpentine cruised silently overhead. From outside the stockade drifted sounds of feet, foreign voices, the whine of a wooden flute. The air was cooling. She shivered. Their home would be too hollow.

Someone approached. She recognized the person glimpsewise, Alsabeta Mondain from Nuevamerica. Listening to her well-meant foolish condolences would be worse than going inside. Evalyth took the last three steps and slid the door shut behind her.

Donli will not be here again. Eternally.

But the cabin proved not to be empty to him. Rather, it was too full. That chair where he used to sit, reading that worn volume of poetry which she could not understand and teased him about, that table across which he had toasted her and tossed kisses, that closet where his clothes hung, that scuffed pair of slippers, that bed—it screamed of him. Evalyth went fast into the laboratory section and drew the curtain that separated it from the living quarters. Rings rattled along the rod. The noise was monstrous in twilight.

She closed her eyes and fists and stood breathing hard. *I will not go soft,* she declared. *You always said you loved me for my strength—among numerous other desirable features, you'd add with your slow grin, but I remember that yet—and I don't aim to let slip anything that you loved.*

I've got to get busy, she told Donli's child. *The expedition command is pretty sure to act on Chena's urging and haul mass for home. We've not many days to avenge your father.*

Her eyes snapped open. *What am I doing,* she thought, bewildered, *talking to a dead man and an embryo?*

She turned on the overflow fluoro and went to the computer. It was made no differently from the other portables. Donli had used it. But she could look away from the unique scratches and bumps on that square case, as she could not escape his microscope, chemanalyzers, chromosome tracer, biological specimens . . . She seated herself. A drink would have been very welcome, except that she needed clarity. "Activate!" she ordered.

The On light glowed yellow. Evalyth tugged her chin, searching for words. "The objective," she said at length, "is to trace a lowlander who has consumed several kilos of flesh and blood from one of this party, and afterward vanished into the jungle. The killing took place about sixty hours ago. How can he be found?"

The least hum answered her. She imagined the links; to the maser in the ferry, up past the sky to the nearest orbiting relay unit, to the next, to the next around the bloated belly of the planet, by ogre sun and inhuman stars, until the pulses reached the mother ship; then down to an unliving brain that routed the question to the appropriate data bank; then to the scanners, whose resonating energies flew from molecule to distorted molecule, identifying more bits of information than it made sense to number data garnered from hundreds or thousands of entire worlds, data preserved through the wreck of Empire and the dark ages that followed, data going back to an Old Earth that perhaps no longer existed. She shied from the thought and wished herself back on dear stern Kraken. *We will go there, she* promised Donli's child. *You will dwell apart from these too many machines and grow up as the gods meant you should.*

"Query," said the artificial voice. "Of what origin was the victim of this assault?"

Evalyth must wet her lips before she could reply: "Atheian He was Donli Sairn, your master."

"In the event, the possibility of tracking the desired local inhabitant may exist. The odds will now be computed. In the interim, do you wish to know the basis of the possibility?"

"Y-yes."

"Native Atheian biochemistry developed in a manner quite parallel to Earth's," said the voice, "and the early colonists had no difficulty in introducing terrestrial species. Thus they enjoyed a friendly envi-

ronment, where population soon grew sufficiently large to obviate the danger of racial change through mutation and/or genetic drift. In addition, no selection pressure tended to force change. Hence the modern Atheian human is little different from his ancestors of Earth, on which account his physiology and biochemistry are known in detail.

"This has been essentially the case on most colonized planets for which records are available. Where different breeds of men have arisen, it has generally been because the original settlers were highly selected groups. Randomness, and evolutionary adaptation to new conditions, have seldom produced radical changes in biotype. For example, the robustness of the average Krakener is a response to comparatively high gravity; his size aids him in resisting cold, his fair complexion is helpful beneath a sun poor in ultraviolet. But his ancestors were people who already had the natural endowments for such a world. His deviations from their norm are not extreme. They do not preclude his living on more Earth-like planets or interbreeding with the inhabitants of these.

"Occasionally, however, larger variations have occurred. They appear to be due to a small original population or to unterrestroid conditions or both. The population may have been small because the planet could not support more, or have become small as the result of hostile action when the Empire fell. In the former case, genetic accidents had a chance to be significant; in the latter, radiation produced a high rate of mutant births among survivors. The variations are less apt to be in gross anatomy than in subtle endocrine and enzymatic qualities, which affect the physiology and psychology. Well known cases include the reaction of the Gwydiona to nicotine and certain indoles, and the requirement of the Ifrians for trace amounts of lead. Sometimes the inhabitants of two planets are actually intersterile because of their differences.

"While this world has hitherto received the sketchiest of examinations—" Evalyth was yanked out of a reverie into which the lecture had led her. "—certain facts are clear. Few terrestrial species have flourished; no doubt others were introduced originally, but died off after the technology to maintain them was lost. Man has thus been forced to depend on autochthonous life for the major part of his food. This life is deficient in various elements of human nutrition. For example, the only Vitamin C appears to be in immigrant plants; Sairn observed that the people consume large amounts of grass and leaves from those species, and that fluoroscopic pictures indicate this prac-

tice has measurably modified the digestive tract. No one would supply skin, blood, sputum, or similar samples, not even from corpses." *Afraid of magic*, Evalyth thought drearily, *yes, they're back to that too.* "But intensive analysis of the usual meat animals shows these to be under-supplied with three essential amino acids, and human adaptation to this must have involved considerable change on the cellular and sub-cellular levels. The probable type and extent of such change are computable."

"The calculations are now complete." As the computer resumed, Evalyth gripped the arms of her chair and could not breathe. "While the answer is subject to fair probability of success. In effect, Atheian flesh is alien here. It can be metabolized, but the body of the local consumer will excrete certain compounds, and these will import a characteristic odor to skin and breath as well as to urine and feces. The chance is good that it will be detectable by neo-Freeholder technique at distances of several kilometers, after sixty or seventy hours. But since the molecules in question are steadily being degraded and dissipated, speed of action is recommended."

I am going to find Donli's murderer. Darkness roared around Evalyth.

"Shall the organisms be ordered for you and given the appropriate search program?" asked the voice. "They can be on hand in an estimated three hours."

"Yes," she stammered. "Oh, please—Have you any other . . . other . . . advice?"

"The man ought not to be killed out of hand, but brought here for examination, if for no other reason, than in order that the scientific ends of the expedition may be served."

That's a machine talking, Evalyth cried. *It's designed to help research. Nothing more. But it was his.* And its answer was so altogether Donli that she could no longer hold back her tears.

VI

THE SINGLE BIG MOON rose nearly full, shortly after sundown. It drowned most stars; the jungle beneath was cobbled with silver and dappled with black; the snowcone of Mount Burus floated unreal at the unseen edge of the world. Wind slid around Evalyth where she crouched on her gravsled; it was full of wet acrid odors, and felt cold though it was not, and chuckled at her back. Somewhere something screeched, every few minutes, and something else cawed reply.

She scowled at her position indicators, aglow on the control panel. Curses and chaos, Moru had to be in this area! He could not have escaped from the valley on foot in the time available, and her search pattern had practically covered it. If she ran out of bugs before she found him, must she assume he was dead? They ought to be able to find his body regardless, ought they not? Unless it was buried deep. Here. She brought the sled to hover, took the next phial off the rack, and stood up to open it.

The bugs came out many and tiny, like smoke in the moonlight. Another failure?

No! Wait! Were not those motes dancing back together, into a streak barely visible under the moon, and vanishing downward? Heart thuttering, she turned to the indicator. Its neurodetector antenna was not aimlessly wobbling, but pointed straight west-northwest, declination thirty-two degrees below horizontal. Only a concentration of the bugs could make it behave like that. And only the particular mixture of molecules to which the bugs had been presensitized, in several parts per million or better, would make them converge on the source.

"Ya-a-ah!" She couldn't help the one hawk-yell. But thereafter she bit her lips shut—blood trickled unnoticed down her chin—and drove the sled in silence.

The distance was a mere few kilometers. She came to a halt above an opening in the forest. Pools of scummy water gleamed in its rank growth. The trees made a solid-seeming wall around. Evalyth clapped her night goggles down off her helmet and over her eyes. A lean-to became visible. It was hastily woven from vines and withes, huddled against a pair of the largest trees to let their branches hide it from the sky. The bugs were entering.

Evalyth lowered her sled to a meter off the ground and got to her

feet again. A stun pistol slid from its sheath into her right hand. Her left rested on the blaster.

Moru's two sons groped from the shelter. The bugs whirled around them, a mist that blurred their outlines. *Of course,* Evalyth realized, nonetheless shocked into a higher hatred. *I should have known they did the actual devouring.* More than ever did they resemble gnomes—skinny limbs, big heads, the pot belly of undernourishment. Krakener boys of their age would have twice their bulk and be noticeably on the way to becoming men. These nude bodies belonged to children, except that they had the grotesqueness of eld.

The parents followed them, ignored by the entranced bugs. The mother wailed. Evalyth identified a few words. "What is the matter, what are those things—oh, help—" But her gaze was locked upon Moru.

Limping out of the hutch, stooped to clear its entrance, he made her think of some huge beetle crawling from an offal heap. But she would know that bushy head though her brain were coming apart. He carried a stone blade, surely the one that had hacked up Donli. *I will take it away from him, and the hand with it,* Evalyth wept. *I will keep him alive while I dismantle him with these my own hands, and in between time he can watch me flay his repulsive spawn.*

The wife's scream broke through. She had seen the metal thing, and the giant that stood on its platform, with skull and eyes shimmering beneath the moon.

"I have come for you who killed my man," Evalyth said.

The mother screamed anew and cast herself before the boys. The father tried to run around in front of her, but his lame foot twisted under him, and he fell into a pool. As he struggled out of its muck, Evalyth shot the woman. No sound was heard; she folded and lay moveless. "Run!" Moru shouted. He tried to charge the sled. Evalyth twisted a control stick. Her vehicle whipped in a circle, heading off the boys. She shot them from above, where Moru couldn't quite reach her.

He knelt beside the nearest, took the body in his arms and looked upward. The moonlight poured relentlessly across him. "What can you now do to me?" he called.

She stunned him too, landed, got off and quickly hogtied the four of them. Loading them aboard, she found them lighter than she had expected.

Sweat had sprung forth upon her, until her coverall stuck dripping to her skin. She began to shake, as if with fever. Her ears buzzed. "I would have destroyed you," she said. Her voice sounded remote and unfamiliar. A still more distant part wondered why she bothered speaking to the unconscious, in her own tongue at that. "I wish you hadn't acted the way you did. That made me remember what the computer said, about Donli's friends needing you for study.

"You're too good a chance, I suppose. After your doings, we have the right under Allied rules to make prisoners of you, and none of his friends are likely to get maudlin about your feelings.

"Oh, they won't be inhuman. A few cell samples, a lot of tests, anesthesia where necessary, nothing harmful, nothing but a clinical examination as thorough as facilities allow.

"No doubt you'll be better fed than at any time before, and no doubt the medics will find some pathologies they can cure for you. In the end, Moru, they'll release your wife and children."

She stared into his horrible face.

"I am pleased," she said, "that to you, who won't comprehend what is going on, it will be a bad experience. And when they are finished, Moru, I will insist on having you at least, back. They can't deny me that. Why, your tribe itself has, in effect, cast you out. Right? My colleagues won't let me do more than kill you, I'm afraid, but on this I will insist."

She gunned the engine and started toward Lokon, as fast as possible, to arrive while she felt able to be satisfied with that much.

VII

AND THE DAYS without him and the days without him.

The nights were welcome. If she had not worked herself quite to exhaustion, she could take a pill. He rarely returned in her dreams. But she had to get through each day and would not drown him in drugs.

Luckily, there was a good deal of work involved in preparing to depart, when the expedition was short-handed and on short notice. Gear must be dismantled, packed, ferried to the ship, and stowed.

New Dawn herself must be readied, numerous systems recommissioned and tested. Her militechnic training qualified Evalyth to double as mechanic, boat jockey, or loading gang boss. In addition, she kept up the routines of defense in the compound.

Captain Jonafer objected mildly to this. "Why bother, Lieutenant? The locals are scared blue of us. They've heard what you did—and this coming and going through the sky, robots, and heavy machinery in action, floodlights after dark—I'm having trouble persuading them not to abandon their town!"

"Let them," she snapped. "Who cares?"

"We did not come here to ruin them, Lieutenant."

"No. In my judgment, though, Captain, they'll be glad to ruin us if we present the least opportunity. Imagine what special virtues *your* body must have."

Jonafer sighed and gave in. But when she refused to receive Rogar the next time she was planetside, he ordered her to do so and to be civil.

The *Klev* entered the biolab section—she would not have him in her living quarters—with a gift held in both hands, a sword of Imperial metal. She shrugged; no doubt a museum would be pleased to get the thing. "Lay it on the floor," she told him.

Because she occupied the single chair, he stood. He looked little and old in his robe. "I came," he whispered, "to say how we of Lokon rejoice that the heaven-borne has won her revenge."

"Is winning it," she corrected.

He could not meet her eyes. She stared moodily at his faded hair. "Since the heaven-borne could . . . easily . . . find those she wished . . . she knows the truth in the hearts of us of Lokon, that we never intended harm to her folk."

That didn't seem to call for an answer.

His fingers twisted together. Then why do you forsake us?" he went on. "When first you came, when we had come to know you and you spoke our speech, you said you would stay for many moons, and after you would come others to teach and trade. Our hearts rejoiced. It was not alone the goods you might someday let us buy, nor that your wisemen talked of ways to end hunger, sickness, danger, and sorrow. No, our jubilation and thankfulness were most for the wonders you opened. Suddenly the world was made great, that had been so narrow. And now you are going away. I have asked, when I dared, and those of your men who will speak to me say none will return. How

have we offended you, and how may it be made right, heaven-borne?"

"You can stop treating your fellow men like animals," Evalyth got past her teeth.

"I have gathered . . . somewhat . . . that you from the stars say it is wrong what happens in the Sacred Place. But we only do it once in our lifetimes, heaven-borne, and because we must!"

"You have no need."

Rogar went on his hands and knees before her. "Perhaps the heaven-borne are thus," he pleaded, "but we are merely men. If our sons do not get the manhood, they will never beget children of their own, and the last of us will die alone in a world of death, with none to crack his skull and let the soul out—" He dared glance up at her. What he saw made him whimper and crawl backwards into the sun-glare.

Later Chena Darnard sought Evalyth. They had a drink and talked around the subject for a while, until the anthropologist plunged in: "You were pretty hard on the sachem, weren't you?"

"How'd you—Oh." The Krakener remembered that the interview had been taped, as was done whenever possible for later study. "What was I supposed to do, kiss his man-eating mouth?"

"No." Chena winced. "I suppose not."

"Your signature heads the list, on the official recommendation that we quit this planet."

"Yes. But—now I don't know. I was repelled. I am However—I've been observing the medical team working on those prisoners of yours. Have you?"

"No."

"You should. The way they cringe and shriek and reach to each other when they're strapped down in the lab and cling together afterward in their cell."

"They aren't suffering any pain or mutilation, are they?"

"Of course not. But they can believe it when their captors say they won't. They can't be tranquilized while under study, you know, if the results are to be valid. Their fear of the absolutely unknown—Well, Evalyth, I had to stop observing. I couldn't take any more." Chena gave the other a long stare. "You might, though."

Evalyth shook her head. "I don't gloat. I'll shoot the murderer because my family honor demands it. The rest can go free, even the boys. Even in spite of what they ate." She poured herself a stiff

draught and tossed it off in a gulp. The liquor burned on the way down.

"I wish you wouldn't," Chena said. "Donli wouldn't have liked it. He had a proverb that he claimed was very ancient—he was from my city, don't forget, and I have known . . . I did know him longer than you, dear. I heard him say, twice or thrice, *Do I not destroy my enemies if it make them my friends?*"

"Think of a venomous insect," Evalyth replied. "You don't make friends with it. You put it under your heel."

"But a man does what he does because of what he is, what his society has made him." Chena's voice grew urgent; she leaned forward to grip Evalyth's hand, which did not respond. What is one man, one lifetime, against all who live around him and all who have gone before? Cannibalism wouldn't be found everywhere over this island, in every one of these otherwise altogether different groupings, if it weren't the most deeply rooted cultural imperative this race has got."

Evalyth grinned around a rising anger. "And what kind of race are they to acquire it? And how about according me the privilege of operating on my own cultural imperatives? I'm bound home, to raise Donli's child away from your gutless civilization. He will not grow up disgraced because his mother was too weak to exact justice for his father. Now if you will excuse me, I have to get up early and take another boatload to the ship and get it inboard."

That task required a while. Evalyth came back toward sunset of the next day. She felt a little more tired than usual, a little more peaceful. The raw edge of what had happened was healing over. The thought crossed her mind, abstract but not shocking, not disloyal: *I'm young. One year another man will come. I won't love you the less, darling.*

Dust scuffed under her boots. The compound was half stripped already, a corresponding number of personnel berthed in the ship. The evening reached quiet beneath a yellowing sky. Only a few of the expedition stirred among the machines and remaining cabins. Lokon lay as hushed as it had lately become. She welcomed the thud of her footfalls on the steps into Jonafer's office.

He sat waiting for her, big and unmoving behind his desk. "Assignment completed without incident," she reported.

"Sit down," he said.

She obeyed, The silence grew. At last he said, out of a stiff face: "The clinical team has finished with the prisoners."

Somehow it was a shock. Evalyth groped for words. "Isn't that too soon? I mean, well, we don't have a lot of equipment, and just a couple of men who can see the advanced stuff, and then without Donli for an expert on Earth biology—Wouldn't a good study, down to the chromosomal level if not further—something that the physical anthropologists could use—wouldn't it take longer?"

"That's correct," Jonafer said. "Nothing of major importance was found. Perhaps something would have been, if Uden's team had any inkling of what to look for. Given that, they could have made hypotheses and tested them in a whole-organism context and come to some understanding of their subjects as functioning beings. You're right, Donli Sairn had the kind of professional intuition that might have guided them. Lacking that, and with no particular clues, and no cooperation from those ignorant, terrified savages, they had to grope and probe almost at random. They did establish a few disgestive peculiarities—nothing that couldn't have been predicted on the basis of ambient ecology."

"Then why have they stopped? We won't be leaving for another week at the earliest."

"They did so on my orders, after Uden had shown me what was going on and said he'd quit regardless of what I wanted."

"What—? Oh." Scorn lifted Evalyth's head. "You mean the psychological torture."

"Yes. I saw that scrawny woman secured to a table. Her head, her body were covered with leads to the meters that clustered around her and clicked and hummed and flickered. She didn't see me; her eyes were blind with fear. I suppose she imagined her soul was being pumped out. Or maybe the process was worse for being something she couldn't put a name to. I saw her kids in a cell, holding hands. Nothing else left for them to hold onto, in their total universe. They're just at puberty; what'll this do to their psychosexual development? I saw their father lying drugged beside them, after he'd tried to batter his way straight through the wall. Uden and his helpers told me how they'd tried to make friends and failed. Because naturally the prisoners know they're in the power of those who hate them with a hate that goes beyond the grave."

Jonafer paused. "There are decent limits to everything, Lieutenant," he ended, "including science and punishment. Especially when, after all, the chance of discovering anything else unusual is slight. I ordered the investigation terminated. The boys and their mother will be flown to their home area and released tomorrow."

"Why not today?" Evalyth asked, foreseeing his reply.

"I hoped," Jonafer said, that you'd agree to let the man go with them."

"No."

"In the name of God—"

"Your God." Evalyth looked away from him. "I won't enjoy it, Captain. I'm beginning to wish I didn't have to. But it's not as if Donli'd been killed in an honest war or feud—or he was slaughtered like a pig. That's the evil in cannibalism; it makes a man nothing but another meat animal. I won't bring him back, but I will somehow even things, by making the cannibal nothing but a dangerous animal that needs shooting."

"I see." Jonafer too stared long out of the window. In the sunset light his face became a mask of brass. "Well," he said finally, coldly, "under the Charter of the Alliance and the articles of this expedition, you leave me no choice. But we will not have any ghoulish ceremonies, and you will not deputize what you have done. The prisoner will be brought to your place privately after dark. You will dispose of him at once and assist in cremating the remains."

Evalyth's palms grew wet. *I never killed a helpless man before!*

But he *did*, it answered. "Understood, Captain," she said.

"Very good, Lieutenant. You may go up and join the mess for dinner if you wish. No announcements to anyone. The business will be scheduled for—" Jonafer glanced at his watch, set to local rotation. "—2600 hours."

Evalyth swallowed around a clump of dryness. "Isn't that rather late?"

"On purpose," he told her. "I want the camp asleep." His glance struck hers. "And want you to have time to reconsider."

"No!" She sprang erect and went for the door.

His voice pursued her. "Donli would have asked you for that."

VIII

NIGHT CAME IN and filled the room. Evalyth didn't rise to turn on the light. It was as if this chair, which had been Donli's favorite, wouldn't let her go.

Finally she remembered the psychodrugs. She had a few tablets left. One of them would make the execution easy to perform. No doubt Jonafer would direct that Moru be tranquilized—now, at last—before they brought him here. So why should she not give herself calmness?

It wouldn't be right.

Why not?

I don't know. I don't understand anything any longer.

Who does? Moru alone. He knows why he murdered and butchered a man who trusted him. Evalyth found herself smiling wearily into the darkness. *He has superstition for his sure guide. He's actually seen his children display the first signs of maturity. That ought to console him a little.*

Odd, that the glandular upheaval of adolescence should have commenced under frightful stress. One would have expected a delay instead. True, the captives had been getting a balanced diet for a change, and medicine had probably eliminated various chronic low-level infections. Nonetheless the fact was odd. Besides, normal children under normal conditions would not develop the outward signs beyond mistaking in this short a time. Donli would have puzzled over the matter. She could almost see him, frowning, rubbing his forehead, grinning one-sidedly with the pleasure of a problem.

"I'd like to have a go at this myself," she heard him telling Uden over a beer and a smoke. "Might turn up an angle."

"How?" the medic would have replied. "You're a general biologist. No reflection on you, but detailed human physiology is out of your line."

"Um-m-m . . . yes and no. My main job is studying species of terrestrial origin and how they've adapted to new planets. By a remarkable coincidence, man is included among them."

But Donli was gone, and no one else was competent to do his work—to be any part of him, but she fled from that thought and from the thought of what she must presently do. She held her mind tightly

to the realization that none of Uden's team had tried to apply Donli's knowledge. As Jonafer remarked, a living Donli might well have suggested an idea, unorthodox and insightful, that would have led to the discovery of whatever was there to be discovered, if anything was. Uden and his assistants were routineers. They hadn't even thought to make Donli's computer ransack its data banks for possibly relevant information. Why should they, when they saw their problem as strictly medical? And, to be sure, they were not cruel. The anguish they were inflicting had made them avoid whatever might lead to ideas demanding further research. Donli would have approached the entire business differently from the outset.

Suddenly the gloom thickened. Evalyth fought for breath. Too hot and silent here; too long a wait; she must do something or her will would desert her and she would be unable to squeeze the trigger.

She stumbled to her feet and into the lab. The fluoro blinded her for a moment when she turned it on. She went to his computer and said: "Activate!"

Nothing responded but the indicator light. The windows were totally black. Clouds outside shut off moon and stars.

"What—" The sound was a curious croak. But that brought a releasing gall: *Take hold of yourself, you blubbering idiot, or you're not fit to mother the child you're carrying.* She could then ask her question. "What explanations in terms of biology can be devised for the behavior of the people on this planet?"

"Matters of that nature are presumably best explained in terms of psychology and cultural anthropology," said the voice.

"M-m-maybe," Evalyth said. "And maybe not." She marshalled a few thoughts and stood them firm amidst the others roiling in her skull. "The inhabitants could be degenerate somehow, not really human." *I want Moru to be.* "Scan every fact recorded about them, including the detailed clinical observations made on four of them in the past several days. Compare with basic terrestrial data. Give me whatever hypotheses look reasonable." She hesitated. "Correction. I mean possible hypotheses—anything that does not flatly contradict established facts. We've used up the reasonable ideas already."

The machine hummed. Evalyth closed her eyes and clung to the edge of the desk. *Donli, please help me.*

At the other end of forever, the voice came to her:

"The sole behavioral element which appears to be not easily explicable by postulates concerning environment and accidental

historical developments, is the cannibalistic puberty rite. According to the anthropological computer, this might well have originated as a form of human sacrifice. But that computer notes certain illogicalities in the idea as follows.

"On Old Earth, sacrificial religion was normally associated with agricultural societies, which were more vitally dependent on continued fertility and good weather than hunters. Even for them, the offering of humans proved disadvantageous in the long run, as the Aztec example most clearly demonstrates. Lokon has rationalized the practice to a degree, making it a part of the slavery system and thus minimizing its impact on the generality. But for the lowlanders it is a powerful evil, a source of perpetual danger, a diversion of effort and resources that are badly needed for survival. It is not plausible that the custom, if ever imitated from Lokon, should persist among every one of those tribes. Nevertheless it does. Therefore it must have some value and the problem is to find what.

"The method of obtaining victims varies widely, but the requirement always appears to be the same. According to the Lokonese, one adult male body is necessary and sufficient for the maturation of four boys. The killer of Donli Sairn was unable to carry off the entire corpse. What he did take of it is suggestive.

"Hence a dipteroid phenomenon may have appeared in man on this planet. Such a thing is unknown among higher animals elsewhere, but is conceivable. A modification of the Y chromosome would produce it. The test for that modification, and thus the test of the hypothesis, is easily made."

The voice stopped. Evalyth heard the blood slugging in her veins. "What are you talking about?"

"The phenomenon is found among lower animals on several worlds," the computer told her. "It is uncommon and so is not widely known. The name derives from the Diptera, a type of dung fly on Old Earth."

Lightning flickered. "Dung fly—good, yes!"

The machine went on to explain.

IX

JONAFER CAME ALONG with Moru. The savage's hands were tied behind his back, and the spaceman loomed enormous over him. Despite that and the bruises he had inflicted on himself, he hobbled along steadily. The clouds were breaking and the moon shone ice-white. Where Evalyth waited, outside her door, she saw the compound reach bare to the saw-topped stockade and a crane stand above like a gibbet. The air was growing cold—the planet spinning toward an autumn—and a small wind had arisen to whimper behind the dust devils that stirred across the earth. Jonafer's footfalls rang loud.

He noticed her and stopped. Moru did likewise. "What did they learn?" she asked.

The captain nodded. "Uden got right to work when you called," he said. "The test is more complicated than your computer suggested—but then, it's for Donli's kind of skill, not Uden's. He'd never have thought of it unassisted. Yes, the notion is true."

"How?"

Moru stood waiting while the language he did not understand went to and fro around him.

"I'm no medic." Jonafer kept his tone altogether colorless. "But from what Uden told me, the chromosome defect means that the male gonads here can't mature spontaneously. They need an extra supply of hormones—he mentioned testosterone and androsterone, I forget what else—to start off the series of changes which bring on puberty. Lacking that, you'll get eunuchism. Uden thinks the surviving population was tiny after the colony was bombed out, and so poor that it resorted to cannibalism for bare survival, the first generation or two. Under those circumstances, a mutation that would otherwise have eliminated itself got established and spread to every descendant."

Evalyth nodded. "I see."

"You understand what this means, I suppose," Jonafer said. "There'll be no problem to ending the practice. We'll simply tell them we have a new and better Holy Food, and prove it with a few pills. Terrestrial-type meat animals can be reintroduced later and supply what's necessary. In the end, no doubt our geneticists can repair that faulty Y chromosome.

He could not stay contained any longer. His mouth opened, a gash

across his half-seen face, and he rasped: "I should praise you for saving a whole people. I can't. Get your business over with, will you?"

Evalyth trod forward to stand before Moru. He shivered but met her eyes. Astonished, she said: "You haven't drugged him."

"No," Jonafer said. "I wouldn't help you." He spat.

"Well, I'm glad." She addressed Moru in his own language: "You killed my man. Is it right that I should kill you?"

"It is right," he answered, almost as levelly as she. "I thank you that my woman and my sons are to go free." He was quiet for a second or two. "I have heard that your folk can preserve food for years without it rotting. I would be glad if you kept my body to give to your sons."

"Mine will not need it," Evalyth said. "Nor will the sons of your sons."

Anxiety tinged his words: "Do you know why I slew your man? He was kind to me, and like a god. But I am lame. I saw no other way to get what my sons must have; and they must have it soon, or it would be too late and they could never become men."

"He taught me," Evalyth said, "how much it is to be a man."

She turned to Jonafer, who stood tense and puzzled. "I had my revenge," she said in Donli's tongue.

"What?" His question was a reflexive noise.

"After I learned about the dipteroid phenomenon," she said. "All that was necessary was for me to keep silent. Moru, his children, his entire race would go on being prey for centuries, maybe forever. I sat for half an hour, I think, having my revenge."

"And then?" Jonafer asked.

"I was satisfied and could start thinking about justice," Evalyth said.

She drew a knife. Moru straightened his back. She stepped behind him and cut his bonds. "Go home," she said. "Remember him."

A Tragedy of Errors

I

Once in ancient days, the then King of England told Sir Christopher Wren, whose name is yet remembered, that the new cathedral of St. Paul which he had designed was "awful, pompous and artificial." Kings have seldom been noted for perspicacity.

LATER AGES WOVE A MYTH about Roan Tom. He became their archetype of those star rovers who fared forth while the Long Night prevailed. As such, he was made to fit the preconceptions and prejudices of whoever happened to mention him. To many scholars, he was a monster, a murderer and thief, bandit and vandal, skulking like some carrion animal through the ruins of the Terran Empire. Others called him a hero, a gallant and romantic leader of fresh young people destined to sweep out of time the remnants of a failed civilization and build something better.

He would have been equally surprised, and amused, by either legend.

"Look," one can imagine his ghost drawling, "we had to eat. For which purpose it's sort o' helpful to keep your throat uncut, no? That was a spiny-tail period. Society'd fallen. And havin' so far to fall, it hit bottom almighty hard. The ee-conomic basis for things like buildin' spaceships wasn't there anymore. That meant little trade between planets. Which meant trouble on most of 'em. You let such go on for a century or two, snowballin', and what've you got? A kettle o' short-lived dwarf nations, that's what—one-planet, one-continent, one-island nations; all of 'em one-lung for sure—where they haven't collapsed even further. No more information-collatin' services, so nobody can keep track o' what's happenin' amongst those millions o' suns. What few spaceships are left in workin' order are naturally the

most valuable objects in sight. So they naturally get acquired by the toughest men around who, bein' what they are, are apt to use the ships for conquerin' or plunderin' . . . and complicate matters still worse.

"Well," and he pauses to stuff a pipe with Earth-grown tobacco, which is available in his particular Valhalla, "like everybody else, I just made the best o' things as I found 'em. Fought? Sure. Grew up fightin'. I was born on a spaceship. My dad was from Lochlann, but out-lawed after a family feud went sour. He hadn't much choice but to turn pirate. One day I was in a landin' party which got bushwhacked. Next I heard, I'd been sold into slavery. Had to take it from there. Got some lucky breaks after a while and worked 'em hard. Didn't do too badly by and large.

"Mind you, though, I never belonged to one o' those freaky cultures that'd taken to glorifyin' combat for its own sake. In fact, once I'd gotten some power on Kraken, I was a lot more int'rested in startin' trade again than in anything else. But neither did I mind the idea o' fightin' if we stood to gain by it, nor o' collectin' any loose piece of property that wasn't too well defended. Also, willy-nilly, we were bound to get into brawls with other factions. Usually those happened a long ways from home. I saw to that. Better there than where I lived, no?

"We didn't always win, either. Sometimes we took a clobberin'. Like finally, what I'd reckon was about the worst time, I found myself skyhootin' away from Sassania, in a damaged ship, alone except for a couple o' wives. I shook pursuit in the Nebula. But when we came out on the other side, we were in a part o' space that wasn't known to us. Old imperial territory still, o' course, but that could mean anything. And we still needed repairs. Once my ship'd been self-fixin', as well as self-crewin', self-pilotin', self-navigatin', aye-ya, even self-aware. But that computer was long gone, together with a lot of other gear. We had to find us a place with a smidgin of industrial capacity, or we were done for."

The image in the viewscreens flickered so badly that Tom donned armor and went out for a direct look at the system he had entered.

He liked being free in space anyway. He had more esthetic sense than he publicly admitted. The men of Kraken were quick to praise the beauty of a weapon or a woman, but would have considered it strange to spill time admiring a view rather than examining the scene

for pitfalls and possibilities. In the hush and dreamlike liberty of weightless, Tom found an inner peace; and from this he turned outward, becoming one with grandeur around him.

After he had fitted a kilometer from it, *Firedrake*'s lean hull did not cut off much vista. But reflections, where energy beams had scored through black camouflage coating to the steel beneath, hurt his eye. . . . He looked away from ship and sun alike. It was a bright sun, intrinsic luminosity of two Sols, though the color was ruddy, like a gold and copper alloy. At a distance of one and a half astronomical units, it showed a disc thirty-four minutes wide; and no magnification, only a darkened faceplate, was necessary to see the flares that jetted from it. Corona and zodiacal light made a bronze cloud. That was not a typical main sequence star, Tom thought, though nothing in his background has equipped him to identify what the strangeness consisted of.

Elsewhere glittered the remoter stars, multitudinous and many-colored in their high night. Tom's gaze circled among them. Yes, yonder was Capella. Old Earth lay on the far side, a couple of hundred light-years from here. But he wanted to go home to Kraken: much less of a trip, ten parsecs or so. He could have picked out its sun with the naked eye, as a minor member of that jewel-swarm, had the Nebula not stood between. The thundercloud mass reared gloomy and awesome athwart a quarter of heaven. And it might as well be a solid wall, if his vessel didn't get fixed.

That brought Tom's attention back to the planet he was orbiting. It seemed enormous at this close remove, a thick crescent growing as the ship swung dayward, as if it were toppling upon him. The tints were green, blue, brown, but with an underlying red in the land areas that wasn't entirely due to the sunlight color. Clouds banded the brightness of many seas; there was no true ocean. The southern polar cap was extensive. Yet it couldn't be very deep, because its northern counterpart has almost disappeared with summer, albeit the axial tilt was a mere ten degrees. Atmosphere rimmed the horizon with purple. A tiny disc was heaving into sight, the further of the two small moons.

Impressive, yes. Habitable, probably according to the spectroscope, certainly according to the radio emissions on which he had homed. (They'd broken off several light-years away, but by then no doubt remained that this system was their origin, and this was the only possible world within the system.) Nonetheless—puzzling. In a way, daunting.

The planet was actually a midget. Its equatorial diameter was 6810 kilometers, its mass 0.15 Terra. Nothing that size ought to have air and water enough for men.

But there were men there, or had been. Feeble and distorted though the broadcasts became, away off in space, Tom had caught Anglic words spoken with human mouths.

He shrugged. One way to find out. Activating his impellers, he flitted back. His boots struck the hull and clung. He free walked to the forward manlock and so inboard.

The interior gee-field was operational. Weight thrust his armor down onto his neck and shoulders. Yasmin heard him clatter and came to help him unsuit. He waved her back. "Don't you see the frost on me? I been in a planet shadow. Your finger'd stick to the metal, kid." Not wearing the radio earplugs, she didn't hear him, but she got the idea and stood aside. Gauntleted, he stripped down to coverall and mukluks and lockered the space equipment. At the same time, he admired her.

She was quiet and dark, but prettier than he had realized at first. That was an effect of personality, reasserting itself after what had happened in Anushirvan. The city has been not only the most beautiful and civilized, but the gayest on all Sassania; and her father was Nadjaf Kuli, the deputy governor. Now he was dead and his palace sacked, and she had fled for her life with one of her Shah's defeated barbarian allies. Yet she was getting back the ability to laugh. Good stock, Tom thought; she'd bear him good sons.

"Did you see trace of humans?" she asked. He had believed her Anglic bore a charming accent—it was not native to her—until he discovered that she had been taught the classical language. Her gazelle eyes flickered from the telescope he carried in one fist on to his battered and weatherbeaten face.

"Trace, yes," he answered bluntly. "Stumps of a few towns. They'd been hit with nukes."

"Oh-h-h. . . ."

"Ease off, youngster." He rumpled the flowing hair. "I couldn't make out much, with nothin' better'n these lenses. We'd already agreed the planet was likely raided, what time the broadcasters quit. Don't mean they haven't rebuilt a fair amount. I'd guess they have. The level o', shall I say in two words, radio activity activity—" Tom paused. "You were supposed to smile at that," he said in a wounded tone.

"Well, may I smile at the second joke, instead?" she retorted

impishly. They both chuckled. Her back grew straighter, in the drab one-piece garment that was all he had been able to give her, and somehow the strength of the curving nose dominated the tenderness of her mouth. "Please go on, my lord."

"Uh, you shouldn't call me that. They're free women on Kraken."

"So we were on Sassania. In fact, plural marriage—"

"I know, I know. Let's get on with business." Tom started down the corridor. Yasmin accompanied him, less gracefully than she had moved at home. The field was set for Kraken weight, which was 1.25 standard. But she'd develop the muscles for it before long.

II

HE HAD GONE through a wedding ceremony with her, once they were in space, at Dagny's insistence. "Who else will the poor child have for a protector but you, the rest of her life? Surely you won't turn her loose on any random planet. At the same time, she *is* aristocratic born. It'd humiliate her to become a plain concubine."

"M-m-m . . . but the heirship problem—"

"I like her myself, what little I've seen of her; and the Kuli barons always had an honorable name. I don't think she'll raise boys who'll try to steal house rule from my sons."

As usual, Dagny was no doubt right.

Anxious to swap findings with her, Tom hurried. The passage reached empty and echoing; air from the ventilators blew loud and chilled him; the stylized murals of gods and sea beasts had changed from bold to pathetic—now that only three people crewed this ship. But they were lucky to be alive—would not have been so, save for the primitive loyalty of his personal guardsmen, who died in their tracks while he ran through the burning city in search of Dagny—when the Pretender's nonhuman mercenaries broke down the last defenses. He found his chief wife standing by the ship with a Mark IV thunderbolter, awaiting his return. She would not have left without him. Yasmin huddled at her feet. They managed to loose a few missiles as they lifted. But otherwise there was nothing to do but hope to fight another day. The damage that *Firedrake* sustained in

running the enemy space fleet had made escape touch and go. The resulting absence of exterior force-fields and much interior homeostasis made the damage worse as they traveled. Either they found the wherewithal for repair here, or they stayed here.

Tom said to Yasmin while he strode: "We couldn't've picked up their radio so far out's we did, less'n they'd had quite a lot, both talk and radar. That means they had a pretty broad industrial base. You don't destroy that by scrubbin' cities. Too many crossroads machine shops and so forth; too much skill spread through the population. I'd be surprised if this planet's not on the way back up."

"But why haven't they rebuilt any cities?"

"Maybe they haven't gotten that far yet. Been less'n ten years, you know. Or, 'course, they might've got knocked clear down to savagery. I've seen places where it happened. We'll find out."

Walking beside the girl, Roan Tom did not look especially noteworthy, certainly not like the rover and trader chieftain whose name was already in the ballads of a dozen planets. He was of medium height, though so broad in shoulders and chest as to look stocky. From his father, he had the long head, wide face, high cheekbones, snub nose and beardlessness of the Lochlanna. But his mother, a freedwoman said to be of Hermetain stock, had given him dark-red hair, which was now thinning, and star-blue eyes. Only the right of those remained; a patch covered where the left had been. (Some day, somewhere, he'd find someone with the knowledge and facilities to grow him a new one!) He walked with the rolling gaint of a Krakener, whose planet is mostly ocean, and bore the intertwining tattoos of his adopted people on most of his hide. A blaster and knife hung at his waist.

Dagny was in the detector shack. Viewscreens might be malfunctioning, along with a lot else, but such instruments as the radionic, spectroscopic, magnetic and sonic were not integrated with ship circuitry. They had kept their accuracy, and she was expert—not educated, but rule-of-thumb expert—in their use.

"Well, there," she said, looking around the console at which she sat. "What'd you see?"

Tom repeated in more detail what he had told Yasmin. Since Dagny spoke no Pelevah and only a little pidgin Anglic, while Yasmin had no Eylan, these two of his wives communicated with difficulty. Maybe that was why they got along so well. "And how 'bout you?" he finished.

"I caught a flash of radiocast. Seemed like two stations communicating from either end of a continental-size area."

"Still, somebody is able to chat a bit," Tom said. "Hopeful." He lounged against the doorframe. "Anyone spot us, d'you think?"

Dagny grinned. "What do *you* think?"

His lips responded. A positive answer would have had them in action at once, he to the bridge, she to the main fire control turret. They couldn't be sure they had not been noticed—by optical system, quickly brushing radar or maser, gadget responsive to the neutrino emission of their proton converter, several other possible ways—but it was unlikely.

"Any further indications?" Tom asked. "Atomic powerplants?"

"I don't know."

"How come?"

"I don't know what the readings mean that I get, particle flux, magnetic variations and the rest. This is such a confoundedly queer sun and planet. I've never seen anything like them. Have you?"

"No."

They regarded each other for a moment that grew very quiet. Dagny, Od's daughter in the House of Brenning, was a big woman, a few years his senior. Her shoulder-length yellow mane was fading a bit, and her hazel eyes were burdened with those contact lenses that were the best help anyone on Kraken knew how to give. But her frame was still strong and erect, her hands still clever and murderously quick. It had been natural for an impoverished noble family to make alliance with an energetic young immigrant who had a goodly following and a spaceship. But in time, voyages together, childbirths and childrearings, the marriage of convenience had become one of affection.

"Well . . . s'pose we better go on down," Tom said. "Sooner we get patched, sooner we can start back. And we'd better not be gone from home too long."

Dagny nodded. Yasmin saw the grimness that touched them and said, "What is wrong, my . . . my husband?"

Tom hadn't the heart to explain how turbulent matters were on Kraken also. She'd learn that soon enough, if they lived. He said merely, "There's some kind o' civilization goin' yet around here. But it may exist only as traces o' veneer. The signs are hard to figure. This is a rogue planet, you see."

"Rogue?" Yasmin was bemused. "But that is a loose planet—sunless—isn't it?"

"You mean a bandit planet. A rogue's one that don't fit in with its usual type, got a skewball orbit or composition or whatever. Like this'n."

"Oh. Yes, I know."

"What?" He caught her shoulder, not noticing how she winced at so hard a grip. "You've heard o' this system before?"

"No . . . please . . . no, my people never came to this side of the Nebula either, with what few ships we had. But I studied some astro-physics and planetography at Anushirvan University."

"Huh?" He let her go and gaped. "Science? Real, Imperialera science, not engineerin' tricks?" She nodded breathlessly. "But I thought—you said—you'd studied classics."

"Is not scientific knowledge one of the classic arts? We had a very complete collection of tapes in the Royal Library." Forlornness came upon her. "Gone, now, into smoke."

"Never mind. Can you explain how come this globe is as it is?"

"Well, I . . . well, no. I don't believe I could. I would need more information. Mass, and chemical data, and—And even then, I would probably not be able. I am not one of the ancient experts."

"Hardly anybody is," Tom sighed. "All right. Let's get us a snack, and then to our stations for planetfall."

III

DESCENT WAS TRICKY. Sensor-computer-autopilot linkups could no longer be trusted. Tom had to bring *Firedrake* in on manual controls. His few instruments were of limited use, when he couldn't get precise data by which to recalibrate them for local conditions. With no viewscreens working properly, he had no magnification, infra-red and ultra-violet presentations, any of the conventional aids. He depended on an emergency periscope, on Dagny's radar readings called via intercom and on the trained reflexes of a lifetime.

Yasmin sat beside him. There was nothing she could do elsewhere, and he wanted to be able to assist her in her inexperience if they must bail out. The spacesuit and gravity impellers surrounded her with an awkward bulk that made the visage in the helmet look like

a child's. Neither one of them had closed a faceplate. Her voice came small through the gathering throb of power: "Is it so difficult to land? I mean, I used to watch ships do it, and even if we are partly crippled—we could travel between the stars. What can an aircar do that we can't?"

"Hyperdrive's not the same thing as kinetic velocity, and most particular not the same as aerodynamic speed," Tom grunted. "To start with, I know the theory o' sublight physics."

"You do?" She was frankly astounded.

"Enough of it, anyhow. I can read and write, too." His hands played over the board. Vibration grew in the deck, the bulkheads, his bones. A thin shrilling was heard, the first cloven atmosphere. "A spaceship's a sort o' big and clumsy object, once out o' her native habitat," he said absently. "Got quite a moment of inertia, f'r instance. Means a sudden, hard wind can turn her top over tip and she don't right easy. When you got a lot o' sensitive machinery to do the work, that's no problem. But we don't." He buried his face in the periscope hood. Cloudiness swirled beneath. "Also," he said, "we got no screens and nobody at the guns. So we'd better be choosy about where we sit down. And . . . we don't have any way to scan an area in detail. Now do be quiet and let me steer."

Already in the upper air, he encountered severe turbulence. That was unexpected, on a planet which received less than 0.9 Terran . . . insolation, with a lower proportion of UV to boot. It wasn't that the atmosphere was peculiar. The spectroscope readout had said the mixture was ordinary oxy-nitro-CO_2, on the thin and dry side—sea level pressure around 600 mm.—but quite breathable. Nor was the phenomenon due to excessive rotation; the period was twenty-five and a half hours. Of course, the inner moon, while small, was close in and must have considerable tidal effect—*Hoy!*

The outercom buzzed. Someone was calling. "Take that, Yasmin," Tom snapped. The ship wallowed. He felt it even through the cushioning internal gee-field, and the attitude meters were wavering crazily. Wind screamed louder. The clouds roiled near, coppery-headed blue-shadowed billows on the starboard horizon, deep purple below him. He had hoped that night and overcast would veil his arrival, but evidently a radar had fingered him. Or—"The knob marked A, you idiot! Turn it widdershins. I can't let go now!"

Yasmin caught her lower lip between her teeth and obeyed. The screen flickered to life. "Up the volume," Tom commanded. "Maybe Dagny can't watch, but she'd better hear. You on, Dagny?"

"Aye." Her tone was crisp from the intercom speaker. "I doubt if I'll understand many words, though. Hadn't you better start aloft and I leave the radar and take over fire control?"

"No, stand where you are. See what you can detect. We're not after a tussle, are we?" Tom glanced at the screen for the instant he dared. It was sidewise to him, putting him outside the pickup arc, but he could get a profile of the three-dimensional image.

The man who gazed out was so young that his beard was brownish fuzz. Braids hung from beneath a goggled fiber crash helmet. But his features were hard; his background appeared to be an aircraft cockpit; and his green tunic had the look of a uniform.

"Who are you?" he challenged. Seeing himself confronted by a girl, he let his jaw drop. "Who are you?"

"Might ask the same o' you," Tom answered for her. "We're from offplanet."

"Why did you not declare yourselves?" The Anglic was thickly accented but comprehensible, roughened with tension.

"We didn't know anybody was near. I reckon you had to try several bands before hittin' the one we were tuned to. Isn't a standard signal frequency any more." Tom spoke with careful casualness, while the ship bucked and groaned around him and lightning zigzagged in the clouds he approached. "Don't worry about us. We mean no harm."

"You trespass in the sky of Karol Weyer."

"Son, we never heard o' him. We don't even know what you call this planet."

The pilot gulped. "N-Nike," he said automatically. "The planet Nike. Karol Weyer is our Engineer, here in Hanno. Who are you?"

Dagny's voice said, in Eylan, "I've spotted him on the scope, Tom. Coming in fast at eleven o'clock low."

"Let me see your face," the pilot demanded harshly. "Hide not by this woman."

"Can't stop to be polite," Tom said. "S'pose you let us land, and we'll talk to your Engineer. Or shall we take our business elsewhere?"

Yasmin's gauntlet closed convulsively on Tom's sleeve. "The look on him grows terrible," she whispered.

"Gods damn," Tom said, "we're friends!"

"What?" the pilot shouted.

"Friends, I tell you! We need help. Maybe you—"

"The screen went blank," Yasmin cried.

Tom risked yawing *Firedrake* till he could see in the direction Dagny had bespoken. The craft was in view. It was a one- or two-man job, a delta wing whose contrail betrayed the energy source as chemical rather than atomic or electric. However, instruments reported it as applying that power to a gravity drive. At this distance he couldn't make out if the boat had guns, but hardly doubted that. For a moment it glinted silvery against the darkling clouds, banked and vanished.

"Prob'ly hollerin' for orders," Tom said. "And maybe reinforcements. Chil'ren, I think we'd better hustle back spaceward and try our luck in some place more sociable than Hanno."

"Is there any?" Dagny wondered.

"Remains to be seen. Let's hope it's not our remains that'll be seen." Tom concentrated on the controls. Lame and weakened, the ship could not simply reverse. She had too much downward momentum and was too deep in Nike's gravity well. He must shift vectors slowly and nurse her up again.

After minutes, Dagny called through the racket and shudderings: "Several of them—at least five—climbing faster than us, from all sides."

"I was afraid o' that," Tom said. "Yasmin, see if you can eavesdrop on the chit-chat between 'em."

"Should we not stay tuned for their call?" the Sassanian asked timidly.

"I doubt they aim to call. If ever anybody acted so scared and angry as to be past reason—No, hold 'er."

The screen had suddenly reawakened. This time the man who stared forth was middle-aged, leonine, bearded to the waist. His coat was trimmed with fur and, beneath the storm in his voice, pride rang. "I am the Engineer," he said. "You will land and be slaves."

"Huh?" Tom said. "Look, we was goin' away—"

"You declared yourselves friends!"

"Yes. We'd like to do business with you. But—"

"Land at once. Slave yourselves to me. Or my craft open fire. They have tommics."

"Nukes, you mean?" Tom growled. Yasmin stifled a shriek. Karol Weyer observed and looked grimly pleased. Tom cursed without words.

The Nikean shook his head. Tom got a glimpse of that, and wasn't sure whether the gesture meant yes, no or maybe in this land. But the

answer was plain: "Weapons that unleash the might which lurks in matter."

And our force-screen generator is on sick leave, Tom thought. *He may be lyin'. But I doubt it, because they do still use gravs here. We can't outrun a rocket, let alone an energy beam. Nor could Dagny, by herself, shoot down the lot in time to forestall 'em.*

"You win," he said. "Here we come."

"Leave your transceiver on," Weyer instructed. "When you are below the clouds, the fish will tell you where to go."

"Fish?" Tom choked. But the screen had emptied, save for the crackling and formlessnesses of static.

"D-d-dialect?" Yasmin suggested.

"Uh, yeh. Must mean somethin' like squadron leader. Good girl." Tom spared her a grin. The tears were starting forth.

"Slaves?" she wailed. "Oh, no, no."

"Course not, if I can help it," he said, *sotto voce* lest the hostiles be listening. "Rather die."

He did not speak exact truth. Having been a slave once, he didn't prefer death—assuming his owner was not unreasonable, and that some hope existed of getting his freedom back. But becoming property was apt to be worse for a woman than a man: much worse, when she was a daughter of Sassania's barons or Kraken's sea kings. As their husband, he was honor bound to save them if he could.

"We'll make a break," he said. "Lot o' wild country underneath. One reason I picked this area. But first we have to get down."

"What's gone by me?" Dagny called.

Tom explained in Eylan while he fought the ship. "But that doesn't make sense!" she said. "When they know nothing about us—"

"Well, they took a bad clobberin', ten years back. Can't expect 'em to act terribly sensible about strangers. And s'posin' this is a misunderstandin' . . . we have to stay alive while we straighten it out. Stand by for a rough jaunt."

IV

THE AIRCRAFT SNARLED INTO SIGHT, but warily, keeping their distance in swoops and circles that drew fantastic trails of exhaust. For a moment Tom wondered if that didn't prove the locals were familiar with space-war techniques. Those buzzeroos seemed careful to stay beyond reach of a tractor or pressor beam, that could have seized them. . . . But no. They were exposed to his guns and missiles, which had far greater range, and didn't know that these were unmanned.

Nevertheless, they were at least shrewd on this planet. From what Tom had let slip, and the battered condition of the vessel, Weyer had clearly guessed that the newcomers were weak. They could doubtless wipe out one or two aircraft before being hit, but could they handle half a dozen? That Weyer had taken the risk and scrambled this much of what must be a very small air fleet suggested implacable enmity. (Why? He couldn't be so stupid as to assume that everyone from off-planet was a foe. Could he?) What was worse, his assessment of the military situation was quite correct. In her present state, *Firedrake* could not take on so many opponents and survive.

She entered the clouds.

For a while Tom was blind. Thunder and darkness encompassed him. Metal toned. The instrument dials glowed like goblin eyes. Their needles spun; the ship lurched; Tom stabbed and pulled and twisted controls, sweat drenched his overall and reeked in his nostrils.

Then he was through, into windy but uncluttered air. Fifteen kilometers beneath him lay that part of the north temperate zone he had so unfortunately chosen. The view was of a valley, cut into a checkerboard pattern that suggested large agricultural estates. A river wound through, shining silver in what first drawn-light reddened the eastern horizon. A few villages clustered along it, and traffic moved, barge trains and watership. A swampy delta spread at the eastern end of a great bay.

That bay was as yet in the hour before sunrise, but glimmered with reflections. It had a narrow mouth, opening on a sea to the west. Lights twinkled on either side of the gate, and clustered quite thickly on the southern bayshore. Tom's glance went to the north. There he saw little trace of habitation. Instead, hills humped steeply toward a

mountain which smoked. Forests covered them, but radar showed how rugged they were.

The outercom flashed with the image of the pilot who had first hailed him. Now that conditions were easier, Tom could have swiveled it around himself to let the scanner cover his own features. Yasmin could have done so for him at any time. But he refrained. Anonymity wasn't an ace in the hole—at most, a deuce or a trey—but he needed every card he had.

"You will bear east-northeast," the "fish" instructed. "About a hundred kilos upriver lies a cave. Descend there."

"Kilos?" Tom stalled. He had no intention of leaving the refuges below him for the open flatlands.

"Distances. Thousand-meters."

"But a cave? I mean, look, I want to be a good fellow and so forth, but how'm I goin' to spot a cave from the air?"

"Spot?" It was the Nikean's turn to be puzzled. However, he was no fool. "Oh, so, you mean espy. A cave is a stronghouse. You will know it by turrets, projectors, setdown fields."

"Your Engineer's castle?"

"Think you we're so whetless we'd let you near the Great Cave? You might have a tommic boom aboard. No. Karol Weyer dwells by the bay gate. You go to the stronghouse guarding the Nereid River valley. Now change course, I said, or we fire."

Tom had used the talk-time to shed a good bit of altitude. "We can't," he said. "Not that fast. Have to get low first, before we dare shift."

"You go no lower, friend! Those are our folk down there."

"Be reasonable," Tom said. "A spaceship's worth your havin', I'm sure, even a damaged one like ours. Why blang us for somethin' we can't help?"

"Um-m-m . . . hold where you are."

"I can't. This is not like an aircraft. I've got to either rise or sink. Ask your bosses."

The pilot's face disappeared. "But—" Yasmin began.

"Shhh!" Tom winked his good eye at her.

He was gambling that they hadn't had spacecraft on Nike for a long time. Otherwise they wouldn't have taken such a licking a decade ago; and they'd have sent a ship after him, rather than those few miserable, probably handmade gravplanes. So if they didn't have

anyone around who was qualified in the practical problems on handling that kind of vessel—

Not but what *Firedrake* wasn't giving him practical problems of his own. Wind boomed and shoved.

The pilot returned. "Go lower if you must," he said. "But follow my word, do above the northshore hills.

"Surely." *Right what I was hopin' for!* Tom switched to Eylan. "Dagny, get to the forward manlock."

"What do you say?" rapped the pilot.

"I'm issuin' orders to my crew," Tom said. "They don't speak Anglic."

"No! You'll not triple-talk me!"

Tom let out a sigh that was a production. "Unless they know what to do, we'll crash. Do you want live slaves and a whole spaceship, or no? Make up your mind, son."

"Um-m . . . well. At first ill-doing, we shoot."

Tom ignored him. "Listen, Dagny. You're not needed here any more. I can land on my altimeter and stuff. But I've got to set us down easy, and not get us hit by some overheated gunner. They must have what we need to make our repairs, but not to build a whole new ship, even s'posin' we knew how. So we can't risk defendin' ourselves, leastwise till we get away from the ship."

"She will be theirs," Dagny said, troubled. "And we will be hunted. Shouldn't we surrender peacefully and bargain with them?"

"What bargainin' power has a slave got? Whereas free, if nothin' else, I get we're the only two on Nike that can run a spacecraft. Besides, we don't know what these fellows are like. They could be mighty cruel. No, you go stand by that manlock along with Yasmin. The minute we touch dirt, you two get out—fast and far."

"But Tom, you'll be on the bridge. What about you?"

"Somebody's got to make that landin'. I dunno how they'll react. But you girls won't have much time to escape yourselves. I'll come after you. If I haven't joined you soon, figure I won't, and do whatever comes natural. And look after Yasmin, huh?"

Silence dwelt for a moment amidst every inanimate noise. Until: "I understand. Tom, if we don't see each other again, it was good with you." Dagny uttered a shaken laugh. "Tell her to kiss you for both of us."

"Aye-ya." He couldn't, of course, with that suspicious countenance

glowering out of the screen. But in what little Pelevah he had, he gave Yasmin her orders. She didn't protest, too stunned by events to grasp the implications.

Down and down. The tilted wilderness swooped at him.

"The steerin's quit on me!" Tom yelled in Anglic. "Yasmin, go fantangle the dreelsprail! Hurry!" She flung off her safety webbing and left the bridge, as fast as possible in her clumsy armor. "I've got to make an emergency landin'," Tom said to the Nikean officer.

Probably that caused them to hold their fire as he had hoped. He didn't know, nor wonder. He was too busy. The sonoprobe said firm solid below. The altimeter said a hundred meters, fifty, twenty-five, ten—Leaves surged around. Boughs and boles splintered. The further trees closed in like a cage. Impact shook, drummed, went to silence. Tom cut the engines and gee-field. Native gravity, one-half standard, hit him with giddiness. He unharnessed himself. The deck was canted. He slipped, skidded, got up and pounded down the companionway.

V

THE MANLOCK VALVES OPENED at Dagny's control while *Firedrake* was still moving. The drop in air pressure hurt her eardrums. She glimpsed foliage against a sky red with dawn, gray with scattering stormclouds. The earthquake landing cast her to hands and knees. She rose, leaning against a bulkhead. Yasmin stumbled into sight. The faceplate stood open before the terrified young visage. "Chaos! Dog that thing!" Dagny cried. "We'll be at top speed." She was not understood. She grabbed the girl and snapped the plate shut herself. "You . . . know . . . fly?" she asked in her fragment of Anglic.

"Yes. I think so." Yasmin wet her lips. Her radio voice was unsteady in the other's earplugs. "I mean . . . Lord Tom explained how."

"No practice, though?" Dagny muttered in Eylan. "You're about to get some.' In Anglic: "Follow I."

She leaned out of the lock. High overhead she described the gleam of a wheeling delta wing. The forest roared with wind. A little clearing

surrounded the ship where trees had been flattened. Beyond the shadowy tangle of their trunks and limbs, their neighbors made a wall of night.

"Go!" Dagny touched her impeller stud and launched herself. She soared up. Flight was tricky in these gusts. Curving about, she saw Yasmin's suit helplessly cartwheel. She returned, caught the Sassanian girl, laid one arm around her waist and used the other to operate her drive units for her in the style of an instructor. They moved off, slowly and awkwardly.

A scream split the air. Dagny glanced as far behind as she could. Two of the aircraft were stooping . . . One took a hoverstance above *Firedrake*, the other came after her and Yasmin. She saw the muzzle of an energy gun and slammed the two impeller sets into full forward speed. Alone, she might have dived under the trees. But Yasmin hadn't the skill, and two couldn't slip through those dense branches side by side. Tom had told her to look after Yasmin, and Dagny was his sworn woman.

She tried to summon before her the children they had had together, tall sons and daughters, the baby grandchildren, and Skerrygarth, their home that was the dowry she had brought him, towers steadfast above a surf that played white among the reefs—

Explosion smashed at her. Had she been looking directly aft, she would have been dazzled into momentary blindness. As it was, the spots before her eyes and the tolling in her ears lasted for minutes. A wave of heat pushed through her armor.

She yelled, clung somehow to Yasmin, and kept the two of them going. Fury spoke again and again. It dwindled with distance as they fled.

Finally it was gone. But that time the women had covered some twenty kilometers, more or less eastward. The sea-level horizon of Nike was only about six kilometers off; and this was not flat country. They were well into morning light and far beyond view of the spaceship. Dagny thought she could yet identify an aircraft or two, but maybe those sparks were something else.

Beneath her continued hills and ravines, thickly wooded, and rushing streams. The volcano bulked in the north; smoke plumed from a frost-rimmed crater. Southward the land rolled down to the quicksilver sheet of the bay. Its shore was marshy—an effect of the very considerable tides that the nearer moon raised—but a village of neat wooden houses stood there on piles. Sailboats that doubtless

belonged to fishermen were putting out. They must exist in such numbers because of a power shortage rather than extreme backwardness; for Dagny saw a good-sized motorship as well, crossing the bay from the gate to the lower, more populous south side. Its hull was of planks and its wake suggested the engine was minimal. At the same time, its lines and the nearly smokeless stack indicated competent design.

Here the wind had gentled, and the clouds were dissipating fast. (Odd to have such small cells of weather, she thought in a detached logical part of herself. Another indication of an atmosphere distrubed by violent solar conditions?) They shone ruddy-tinted in a deep purple vault of sky. The sun stood bright orange above mists that lay on the Nereid River delta.

"Down we go, lass," Dagny said, "before we're noticed."

"What happened? Lord Tom, where is he?"

The sob scratched at Dagny's nerves. She snapped, biting back tears: "Use your brain, you little beast, if it's anything except blubber! He went first to the main fire-control turret. When he saw us attacked, he cut loose with the ship's weapons. I don't see how he could have gotten all those bastards, though. If they didn't missile him, they've anyhow bottled him up. On *our* account!"

She realized she's spoken entirely in Eylan. Suppressing a growl, she took over the controls of both suits. With no need for haste, she could ease them past the branches that tried to catch them, down to the forest floor.

"Now," she said in Anglic. "Out." Yasmin gaped. Dagny set the example by starting to remove her own armor.

"Wh-why?"

"Find us. In . . . in . . . instru-ments. Smell metal, no? Could be. Not take chance. We got—got to—" Dagny's vocabulary failed her. She had wanted to explain that if they stayed with the suits, they ran the risk of detection from afar. And even if the Nikeans didn't have that much technology left, whatever speed and protection the equipment lent wasn't worth its conspicuousness.

She was almost grateful for every difficulty. It kept her mind—somewhat—off the overwhelming fact that Tom, her Roan Tom, was gone.

Or maybe not. Just maybe, not. He might be a prisoner, and she might in time contrive to bargain for his release. No, she would not

remember what she had seen done to prisoners, here and there in her wanderings, by vengeful captors!

Were that the case, though. . . . Her hand went first to the blaster at one coveralled hip, next to the broad-bladed knife; and there it lingered. If she devoted the rest of her days to the project, and if the gods were kind, she might eventually get his murderers into her clutch.

Yasmin shed the last armor. She hugged herself and shivered in a chill breeze. "But we haven't any radios except in our helmets," she said. "How can he contact us?"

Dagny framed a reply: "If he'd been able to follow us, he'd already be here, or at least have called. I left my squealer circuit on, for him to track us by. That was safe; its frequencey varies continuously, according to synchronized governors in both our suits. But he hasn't arrived, and we daren't stay near this much metal and resonant electronic stuff." Somehow, by words and gestures, she conveyed the gist. Meanwhile she filled their pockets with rations and medications, arranged the weapons beneath their garments, checked footgear. Last she hid the armor under leaf mould and canebrake, and took precise note of landmarks.

Yasmin's head drooped until the snarled dark locks covered her face. "I am so tired," she whispered.

Think I'm not? My lips are numb with it. "Go!" Dagny snapped.

She had to show the city-bred girl how to conceal their trail through the woods.

After a couple of hours, unhounded, the air warming and brightening around them, both felt a little better. It was up-and-down walking, but without much underbrush to combat, for the ground was densely carpeted with a soft mossy growth. Here and there stood clumps of fronded gymnosperm plants. This native vegetation was presumably chlorophyl-bearing, though its greenness was pale and had a curious bluish overcast. Otherwise the country had been taken over by the more efficient, highly developed species that man commonly brought with him. Oaks cast sun-speckled shadows; birches danced and glistened; primroses bloomed in meadows, where grass had overwhelmed a pseudo-moss that apparently had a competitive advantage only in shade. A sweet summery smell was about, and Yasmin spoke of her homeland. Even Dagny, bred in salt winds and unrestful watery leagues, felt a stirring of ancient instinct.

She was used to denser atmosphere. Sounds—sough in leaves,

whistle of birds, rilling of brooks they crossed, thud of her own feet—came as if muffled to her ears; and on a steep upgrade, her heart was apt to flutter. But oxygen shortage was more or less compensated for by a marvelous, almost floating low-gravity lightness.

A good many animals were to be seen. Again, terrestroid forms had crowded out most of the primitive native species. With a whole ecology open to them, they were now in the process of explosive evolution. A few big insect-like flyers, an occasional awkward amphibian, gave glimpses of the original biosphere. But thrushes, bulbuls, long-winged hawks rode the wind. Closer down swarmed butterflies and bees. A wild boar, tusked and rangy, caused Dagny to draw her blaster; but he went by, having perhaps learned to fear man. Splendid was the more distant sight of mustangs, carabao, an entire herd of antlered six-legged tanithars.

A measure of peace came upon Dagny, until at last she could say, "All right, we stop, eat, rest."

They sat under a broadspreading hilltop cedar, that hid them from above while openness, halfway down the heights to the forest, afforded ample ground vision. They had made for the bay and were thus at a lower altitude. The waters sheened to south, ridges and mountains stood sharply outlined to north. In this clear air, the blueness of their distance was too slight to hide the basic ocherous tint of rocks and soil.

Dagny broke out a packet of dehydrate. She hesitated for a moment before adding water to the tray from a canteen she had filled en route. Yasmin, slumped exhausted against the tree trunk, asked, "What is the matter?" And, her eyes and mind wandering a little, she tried to smile. "See, yonder, apples. They are green but they can be dessert."

"No," Dagny said.

"What? Why not?"

"Heavy metal." Dagny scowled. How to explain? "Young planet. Dense. Lots heavy metals. Not good."

"Young? But—"

"Look around you," Dagny wanted to say. "That sun, putting out radiation like an early Type F—in amount—but the color and spectral distribution are late G or early K. I've never seen anything like it. The way it flares, I don't believe it's quite stabilized at its proper position on the main sequence yet. Because of anomalous chemical composition, I suppose. You get that with very young suns, my dear. They've condensed out of an interstellar medium made rich in metals by the

thermonuclear furnaces of earlier star generations. Or so I've been told.

"I know for fact that planets with super-abundant heavy elements can be lethal to men. So much. . .oh, arsenic, selenium, radioactives. Slow poison in some areas, fast and horrible death in others. This water, that fruit, may have stuff to kill us."

But she lacked words or inclination. She said, "Iron. Makes red in rocks. No? Lots iron. Could be lots bad metal. Young planet. Lots air, no?"

She had, in truth, never heard of a dwarf world like this, getting such an amount of sunlight, that had hung onto a proper atmosphere. Evidently, she thought, there had not been time for the gas to leak into space. The primitive life forms were another proof of a low age.

Beyond this, she didn't reason.

She did not have the knowledge on which to base logic, nor did she have the scientific way of thinking. What little cosmology and cosmogony she had learned, for instance, was in the form of vague, probably distorted tradition—latter-day myth. And she was intelligent enough to recognize this.

Once, she imagined, any Imperial space officer had been educated in the details of astrophysics and planetology. And he would have seen, or read about, a far greater variety of suns than today's petty travels encompassed. So he would have known immediately what sort of system this was; or, if not, he would have known how to find out.

But that was centuries ago. The information might not actually be lost. It might even be moldering in the damp, uncatalogued library of her own Skerrygarth. Surely parts of it were taught in the universities of more civilized planets, though as a set of theoretical ideas, to be learned by rote without any need for genuine comprehension.

Practical spacefarers, like her and Tom, didn't learn it. They didn't get the chance. A rudiment of knowledge was handed down to them, largely by word of mouth, the minimum they needed for survival.

And speaking of survival—

She reached her decision. "Eat," she said. "Drink." She took the first sample. The water had a woodsy taste, nothing unfamiliar.

After all, humans did flourish here. Perhaps they were adapted to metal-rich soil. But the adaptation could scarcely be enormous. Had that been the case, terrestroid species would not be so abundant and

dominant, after a mere thousand years or whatever on this planet.

Thus Nike was biochemically safe—at least, in this general region—at least, for a reasonable time. Perhaps, if outworlders stayed as long as one or two decades, they might suffer from cumulative poisoning. But she needn't worry that far ahead, when a hunt was on immediately and when Tom—

Grimly, she fueled her body. Afterward she stood watch while Yasmin caught a nap. What she thought about was her own affair.

When the Sassanian awoke, they held a lengthy conference. The order Dagny had to issue was not complicated:

"We're in enemy territory. But I don't believe it covers the whole planet, or even the whole area between this sea and the next one east. 'The Engineer of Hanno' is a typical feudal title. I've not heard before that 'engineer' changed meaning to the equivalent of 'duke' or 'king,' but it's easy to see how that could've happened, and I've met odder cases of wordshift. Well, our darling Engineer made it plain he regarded us as either the worst menace or the juiciest prey that'd come by in years. Maybe both. So he'd naturally call his full air power, or most of it, against us. Which amounted to half a dozen little craft, with gravmotors so weak they need wings! And look at those sailboats, and the absence of real cities, and the fact there's scarcely any radio in use . . . yes, they've fallen far on Nike. I'm sure that raid from space was only the latest blow. They must have a small half-educated class left, and some technicians of a sort; but the bulk of the people must've been poor and ignorant for many generations.

"And divided. I swear they must be divided. I've seen so many societies like this, I can practically identify them by smell. A crazy-quilt pattern of feudalisms and sovereignties, any higher authority a ghost. If as rich a planet as this one potentially is were united, it'd have made a far greater recovery by now, after the space attack, than it has done. Or it would have beaten the raiders off at least.

"So, if we have enemies here in Hanno, we probably have automatic friends somewhere else. And not dreadfully far away. At any rate, we're not likely to be pursued beyond the nearest border, nor extradited back here. In fact, the Engineer's rivals are apt to be quite alarmed when they learn he's clapped hands on a real space warship. They're apt to join forces to get it away from him. Which'll make you and me, my dear, much-sought-after advisors. We may or may not be able to get Tom back unhurt. I vow the gods a hundred Blue Giant seabeasts if we do! But we'll be free, even powerful.

"Or so I hope. We've nothing to go on but hope. And courage and wits and endurance. Have you those, Yasmin? Your life was too easy until now. But he asked me to care for you.

"You'll have to help. Our first and foremost job is to get out of Hanno. And I don't speak their damned language for diddly squat. You'll talk for both of us. Can you? We'll plan a story. Then, if and when you see there must be a false note in it, you'll have to cover—at once—with no ideas from me. Can you do that, Yasmin? You must!"

—But conference was perforce by single words, signs, sketches in the red dirt. It went slowly. And it was repeated, over and over, in every possible way, to make certain they understood each other.

In the end, however, Yasmin nodded. "Yes," she said, "I will try, as God gives me strength . . . and as you do." The voice was almost inaudible, and the eyes she turned on the bigger, older woman were dark with awe.

VI

IN MIDAFTERNOON THEY REACHED A FARM. Its irregular fields were enclosed by forest, through which a cart track ran to join a dirt road that, in turn, twisted over several kilometers until it entered the fisher village.

Dagny spent minutes peering from a thicket. Beside her, Yasmin tried to guess what evaluations the Krakener was making. *I should begin to learn these ways of staying alive,* the Sassanian thought. *More is involved than my own welfare. I don't want to remain a burden on my companions, an actual danger to them.*

And to think, not one year ago I took for granted the star rovers were ignorant, dirty, cruel, quarrelsome barbarians!

Yasmin had been taught about philosophic objectivity, but she was too young to practice it consistently. Her universe having been wrecked, herself cast adrift, she naturally seized upon the first thing that felt like a solid rock and began to make it her emotional foundation. And that thing happened to be Roan Tom and Dagny Od's-daughter.

Not that she had intellectual illusions. She knew very well that the

Krakeners had come to help the Shah of Sassania because the Pretender was allied with enemies of theirs. And she knew that, if successful, they would exact good pay. She heard her father grumble about it.

Nevertheless, the facts were: First, compatriots of hers, supposedly civilized, supposedly above the greed and short-sightedness that elsewhere had destroyed civilization . . . had proven themselves every bit as animalistic. Second, the star-rover garrison in Anushirvan turned out to be jolly, well-scrubbed, fairly well-behaved. Indeed, they were rather glamorous to a girl who had never been past her planet's moon. Third, they had stood by their oaths, died in their ships and at their guns, for her alien people. Fourth, two of them had saved her life, and offered her the best and most honorable way they could think of to last out her days. Fifth (or foremost?), Tom was now her husband.

She was not exactly infatuated with him. A middle-aged, battle-beaten, one-eyed buccaneer had never entered her adolescent dreams. But he was kind in his fashion, and a skillful lover, and . . . and perhaps she did care for him in a way beyond friendship . . . if he was alive—oh, let him be alive!

In any event, here was Dagny. *She* certainly felt grief like a sword in her. But she hid it, planned, guided, guarded. She had stood in the light of a hundred different suns, had warred, wandered, been wife and mother and living sidearm. She knew everything worth knowing (what did ancient texts count for?) except one language. And she was so brave that she trusted her life to what ability an awkward weakling of a refugee might possess.

Please don't let me fail her.

Thus Yasmin looked forth too and tried to make inferences from what she saw.

The house and outbuildings were frame, not large, well-built but well-weathered. Therefore they must have stood here for a good length of time. Therefore Imperial construction methods—alloy, prestressed concrete, synthetics, energy webs—had long been out of general use in these parts, probably everywhere on Nike. That primitiveness was emphasized by the agromech system. A couple of horses drew a haycutter. It also was wooden; even the revolving blades were simply edged with metal. From its creaking and bouncing, the machine had neither wheel bearings nor springs. A man drove it. Two half-grown boys, belike his sons, walked after. They

used wooden-tined rakes to order the windrows. The people, like the animals, were of long slim deep-chested build, brown-haired and fair-complexioned. Their garments were coarsely woven smock and trousers.

No weapons showed, which suggested that the bay region was free of bandits and vendettas. Nevertheless Dagny did not approach. Instead, she led a cautious way back into the woods and thence toward the house, so that the buildings screened off view of the hayfield.

The Krakener woman scowled. "Why?" she muttered.

"Why what . . . my lady?"

"Why make —" Dagny's hands imitated whirling blades. "Here. Planet . . . canted? . . . little. No cold?"

"Oh. Do you mean, why do they bother making hay? Well, there must be times when their livestock can't pasture."

Dagny understood. Her nod was brusque. "Why that?"

"Um-m-m . . . oh, dear, let me think. Lord Tom explained to me what he—what you two had learned about this planet. Yes. Not much axial tilt. I suppose not an unusually eccentric orbit. So the seasons oughtn't to be very marked. And we are in a rather low latitude anyway, on a seacoast at that. It should never get too cold for grass. Too dry? No, this *is* midsummer time. And, well, they'd hardly export hay to other areas, would they?"

Dagny shrugged.

It is such a strange world, Yasmin thought. *All wrong. Too dense. That is, if it had a great many heavy metals, humans would never have settled here permanently. So what makes it dense should be a core of iron, nickel and things, squeezed into compact quantum states. The kind that terrestroid planets normally have. Yes, and the formation of a true core causes tectonic processes, vulcanism, the outgassing of a primitive atmosphere and water. Later we get chemical evolution, life, photosynthesis, free oxygen–*

But Nike is too small for that! It's Mars type. We have a Mars type planet in our own system—oh, lost and loved star that shines upon Sassania—*and it's got a bare wisp of unbreathable air. Professor Nasruddin explained to us. If a world is small, it has weak gravity. So the differential migration of elements down toward the center, that builds a distinct core, is too slow. So few gas molecules get unlocked from mineral combination by heat. . . . Nike isn't possible!*

(How suddenly, shockingly real came back to her the lecture hall, and the droning voice, young heads bent above notebooks, sunlight

that streamed in through arched windows, and the buzz of bees, odor of roses, a glimpse of students strolling across a greensward that stretched between beautiful buldings.)

Dagny's fingers clamped about Yasmin's arm. "Heed! Fool!"

Yasmin started from her reverie. They were almost at the house. "Heavens! I'm sorry."

"Talk well." Dangy's voice was bleak with doubt of her.

Yasmin swallowed and stepped forth into the yard. She felt dizzy. The knocking of her heart came remote as death. Penned cows, pigs, fowl were like things in a dream. There was something infinitely horrible about the windmill that groaned behind the barn.

Neither shot nor shout met her. The door opened a crack, and the woman who peered out did so fearfully.

Why, she's nervous of us!

Relief passed through Yasmin in a wave of darkness. But an odd, alert calm followed. She perceived with utter clarity. Her thoughts went in three or four directions at once, all coherent. One chain directed her to smile, extend unclenched hands, and say: "Greeting to you, good lady." Another observed that the boards of the house were not nailed but pegged together. A third paid special heed to the windmill. It too was almost entirely of wood, with fabric sails. She saw that it pumped water into an elevated cistern, whence wooden pipes ran to the house and a couple of sheds. Attachments outside one of the latter indicated that there the water, when turned on, drove various machines, like the stone quern she could see.

No atomic or electric energy, then. Nor even solar or combustion power. And yet the knowledge of these things existed: if not complete, then sufficient to make aircraft possible, radio, occasional motorships, doubtless some groundcars. Why was it no longer applied by the common people? The appearance of this farm and of the fisher village as seen from a distance suggested moderate prosperity. The Engineer's rule could not be unduly harsh.

Well, the answer must be, Nike's economy had collapsed so far that hardly anyone could afford real power equipment.

But why not? Sunlight, wood, probably coal and petroleum were abundant. A simple generator, some batteries . . . . Such things took metal. A broken-down society might not have the resources to extract much. . . . Nonsense! Elements like iron, copper, lead, and uranium were surely simple to obtain, even after a thousand years of

industrialization. Hadn't Dagny, who knew, said this was a young planet? Weren't young planets metal-rich?

Meanwhile the woman mumbled, "Day. You're from outcountry?"

"Yes," Yasmin said. No use trying to conceal that. Quite apart from accent and garments (the Hannoan woman wore a broad-sleeved embroidered blouse and a skirt halfway to her ankles), they were not of the local racial type. But it was presumably not uniform over the whole planet. One could play on a peasantry's likely ignorance of anything beyond its own neighborhood.

"I am from Kraken," Yasmin said. "My friend is from Sassania." If no one on those comparatively cosmopolitan planets had heard of Nike, vice versa was certain. "We were flying on a mission when our aircraft crashed in the hills.

"That . . . was the flare . . . noises . . . this early-day?" the woman asked. Yasmin confirmed it. The woman drew breath and made a shaky sign in the air. "High 'Uns I thank! We feared, we, 'twas *them* come back."

Obvious who "they" were, and therefore impossible to inquire about them. A little hysterical with relief, the wife flung wide her door. "Enter you! Enter you! I call the men."

"No need, we thank you," Yasmin said quickly. The fewer who saw them and got a chance later to wonder and talk about them, the better. "Nor time. We must hurry. Do you know of our countries?"

"Well, er, far off." The woman was embarrassed. Yasmin noted that the room behind her was neat, had a look of primitive well-being—but how primitive! Two younger children stared half frightened from an inner doorway. "Yes, far, and I, poor farmwife, well, hasn't so much as been to the Silva border—"

"That's the next country?" Yasmin pounced.

"Why . . . next cavedom, yes, 'tother side of the High Sawtooths east'ard . . . . Well, we're both under the Emp'ror, but they do say as the Prester of Silva's not happy with our good Engineer. . . . You! A-travel like men!"

"They have different customs in our part of the world," Yasmin said. "More like the Empire. Not your Empire. The real one, the Terran Empire, when women could do whatever a man might." That was a safe claim. Throughout its remnants, no one questioned anything wonderful asserted about the lost Imperium—except, perhaps, a few unpleasant scholars, who asked why it had fallen if it

had been so great. "Yes, we're from far parts. My friend speaks little Anglic. They don't, in her country." That was why Dagny, clever Dagny, had said they should switch national origins. Krakener place names sounded more Anglic than Sassanian ones did, and Yasmin needed a ready-made supply.

"We have to get on with our mission as fast as possible," she said. "But we know nothing about these lands."

Storm blow you off track?" the woman queried. As she relaxed, she became more intelligent. "Bad storm-time coming, we think. Lots rain already. Hope the hay's not ruined before it dries."

"Yes, that's what happened." *Thank you, madam, for inventing my explanation.* Yasmin could not resist probing further the riddle of Nike. "Do you really expect many storms?"

VII

ONE CHILD HUSTLED AFTER HIS FATHER while they went in and took leather-covered chairs. The woman made a large to-do about coffee and cakes. Her name was Elanor, she said, and her husband was Petar Landa, a freeholder. One must not think them backwoods people. They were just a few hours from the town of Sea Gate, which lay nigh the Great Cave itself and was visited by ships from this entire coast. Yes, the Landa family went there often; they hadn't missed a Founders' Festival in ten years, except for the year after the friends came, when there had been none—

"You only needed a year to recover from something like that?" Yasmin exclaimed.

Dagny showed alarm, laying a hand on the Sassanian's and squeezing hard. Elanor Landa was surprised. "Well, Sea Gate wasn't hit. Not that important. Nearest place was . . . I forgot, all the old big cities went, they say, bombed after being looted, but seems me I heard Terrania was nearest to Hanno. Far off, though, and no man I know was ever there, because 'twas under the Mayor of Bollen and he wasn't any camarado to us western cavedoms, they say—"

Yasmin saw her mistake. Unthinkingly, she had taken "year" to

mean a standard, Terran year. It came the more natural to her because Sassania's wasn't very different. *Well,* though the clarified brain within her, *we came here to get information that might help us escape. And surely, if we're to pretend to be Nikeans, we must know how the planet revolves.*

"I've forgotten," she said. "Exactly when was the attack?"

Elanor was not startled. Such imprecision was common in a largely illiterate people. Indeed, it was somewhat astonishing that she should say, "A little over five years back. Five and a quarter, abs'lut, come Petar's father's birthday. I remember, for we planned a feast, and then we heard the news. We had radio news then. Everyone was so scared. Later I saw one black ship roar over us, and waited for my death, but it just went on."

"I think we must use a different calendar from you in Kraken," Yasmin said. "And—being wealthier, you understand—not that Hanno *isn't*—but we did suffer worse. We lost records and—Well, let's see if Kraken and Sassania were attacked on the same day you heard about it. That was . . . let me think . . . dear me, now, how many days in a year?"

"What? Why, why, five hundred and ninety-one."

Yasmin allayed Elanor's surprise by laughing: "Of course. I was simply trying to recollect if an intercalary date came during the period since."

"A what?"

"You know. The year isn't an exact number of days long. So they have to put in an extra day or month or something, every once in a while." That was a reasonable bet.

It paid off, too. Elanor spoke of an extra day every eleventh Nikean year. Yasmin related how in Kraken they added a month—"What do you call the moons hereabouts? . . . I mean by a month, the time it takes for them both to get back to the same place in the sky . . . We add an extra one every twentieth year." Her arithmetic was undoubtedly wrong, but who was going to check? The important point was that Nike circled its sun in 591 days of 25.5 hours each, as near as made no difference.

And hadn't much in the way of seasons, but did suffer from irregular, scarcely predictable episodes when the sun grew noticeably hotter or cooler.

And was poor in heavy metals. Given all the prior evidence, what Yasmin wormed from the chattersome Elanor was conclusive. Quite

likely iron oxides accounted for the basic color. But they were too diffuse to be workable. Metals had never been mined on this globe; they were obtained electrochemically from the sea and from clays. (Aluminum, beryllium, magnesium and the like; possibly a bit of heavy elements too, but only a bit. For the most part, iron, copper, silver, uranium, *etc.*, had been imported from outsystem, in exchange for old-fashioned Terrestrial agroproducts that must have commanded good prices on less favored worlds. This would explain why, to the very present, Nike had such a pastoral character.)

The Empire fell. The starships came less and less often. Demoralization ruined the colonies in their turn; planets broke up politically; in the aftermath, most industry was destroyed, and the social resources were no longer there to build it afresh. Today, on Nike, heavy metals were gotten entirely through reclaiming scrap. Consequently they were too expensive for anything but military and the most vital civilian uses. Even the lighter elements came dear; some extractor plants remained, but not enough.

Elanor did not relate this directly. But she didn't need to. Trying to impress her distinguished guests, she made a parade of setting an aluminum coffeepot on the ceramic stove and mentioning the cost. (A foreigner could plausibly ask what that amounted to in real wages. It was considerable.) And, yes, Petar's grandmother had had a lot of ironware in her kitchen. When he inherited, Petar was offered enormous sums for his share. But he had it made into cutting-edge implements. He cared less about money than about good tools. Petar did. Also for his wife. See, ladies, see right here, I use a real steel knife.

"Gold," Dagny said, low and harsh in Yasmin's ear. "Animals, buy, ride."

The younger girl jerked to alertness. Tired, half lulled by Elanor's millwheel voice, she had drifted off into contemplation. Dagny said this was a young world. Nevertheless it was metal-poor. The paradox had an answer. This system could have formed in the galactic halo, where stars were few and the interstellar dust and gas were thin, little enriched. Yes, that must be the case. It had drifed into this spiral arm. . . . But wouldn't it, then, have an abnormal proper motion? Tom hadn't mentioned observing any such thing. Nor had he said there was anything peculiar about Nike's own orbit. Yet he had remarked on less striking facts. . . .

"Tell! Buy!"

Yasmin nodded frantically. "I understand. I understand." They carried a number of Sassanian gold coins. In an age when interstellar currency and credit had vanished, the mental had resumed its ancient economic function. The value varied from place to place, but was never low, and should be fabulous on Nike.

"Good lady," Yasmin said, "we are grateful for your kindness. But we have imposed too much. We should not take any of your men away from the hayfields when storms may be coming. If you will spare us two horses, we can make our own way to Vala and thence, of course, to your Engineer."

Like fun we will! We'll turn east. Maybe we'll ride horseback, maybe we'll take passage on a river boat—whatever looks safest—but we're bound for his enemy, the Prester of Silva!

We'll pay for them," Yasmin said. "Our overlords provided us well with money. See." She extended a coin. "Will this buy two horses and their gear?"

Elanor gasped. She made a sign again, sat down and fanned herself. Her youngest child sensed his mother's agitation and whimpered.

"Is that gold?" she breathed. "Wait. Till Petar comes. He comes soon. We ask him."

That was logical. But suppose the man got suspicious.

Yasmin glanced back at Dagny. The Krakener made an imperceptible gesture. Beneath their coveralls were holstered energy weapons.

No! We can't slaughter a whole, helpless family!

I hope we won't need to.

I won't! Not for anything!

VIII

TOM REACHED THE FIRE-CONTROL TURRET as two aircraft peeled off their squadron and dove.

The skyview was full of departing stormclouds, tinged bloody with dawn. Against them, his space-armored women looked tiny. Not so their hunters. Those devilfish shapes swelled at an appalling speed. Tom threw himself into a manual-operation seat and punched for

Number Two blastcannon. A cross-hair screen lit for him with what that elevated weapon "saw." He twisted verniers. The auxiliary motors whirred. The vision spun giddily. There . . . the couple was separating . . . one to keep guard on him, its mate in a swoop after Dagny and Yasmin. Tom got the latter centered and pressed the discharge button.

The screen stepped down the searing brightness of the energy bolt. Through the open manlock crashed the thunderclap that followed. The Hannoan craft exploded into red-hot shards that rained down upon the trees.

"Gotcha!" Tom exulted. He fired two or three more times, raking toward the other boat where it hung on its negafield some fifty meters aloft. His hope was to scare it off and bluff its mates into holding their bombs—or whatever they had to drop on him. He didn't want to kill again. The first shot had looked necessary if the girls were to live. But why add to the grudge against him?

Not that he expected to last another five minutes.

"No! Wait! Tom swiveled around to another set of controls. Why hadn't he thought of this at once?

The nearby pilot had needed a couple of seconds to recover from the shock of what happened to his companion. Now he was bound hastily back upward. He was too late. Tom focused a tractor beam on him. Its generator hummed with power. Ozone stung the nostrils; rewiring job needed, a distant aspect of Tom took note. Most of him was being a fisherman. He'd gotten his prey, and on a heavy line—the force locked onto the airboat was meant to grab kilotons moving at cosmic velocities—but his catch was a man-eater. And he wanted to land it just so.

The vessel battled futilely to escape. Tom pushed it down near *Firedrake's* hull, into the jumble of broken trees and canebrake that his own landing had made. Their branches probably damaged wings and fuselage, but their leaves, closing in above, hid any details of what was going on from the pilots overhead. Having jammed his capture against a fence of logs and brush, he held it there with a beam sufficiently narrow that the cockpit canopy wouldn't be pulled shut. Quickly, with a second tractor-pressor projections, he rearranged the tangle in the clearing, shifting trunks, snapping limbs and tossing them about, until he had a fairly good view through a narrow slot that wouldn't benefit observers in heaven. He trusted they were too poorly instrumented—or too agitated, or both—to see how useful the

arrangement was for him, and would take the brief stirring they noticed as a natural result of a crash, heaped wood collapsing into a new configuration.

Thereafter he left the turret and made his way to the forward manlock. It was rather high off the ground; the access ladder had automatically extruded, plunging down into the foliage that fluttered shadowy around the base of the hull. Tom placed himself in the chamber, invisible from the sky, hardly noticeable from beneath, and studied his fish more closely.

Fish: yes, indeed. In two senses. The pilot was that youthful squadron leader with whom he had spoken before. Tom tuned his helmet radio in on the frantic talk that went between the downed man, his companions and Karol Weyer in Sea Gate. He gathered they had no prehensile force-beams on Nike, and only vaguely inferred the existence of such things from their experience with "friends."

Friends? The raiders from space? Tom scowled.

But he couldn't stop to think beyond this moment. His notion had been to take a man and an aircraft—the latter probably the more highly valued—as hostages. They'd not nuke him now. But as for what followed, he must play his cards as he drew them. At worst, he'd gotten the girls free. Perhaps he could strike some kind of bargain, though it was hard to tell why any Nikean should feel bound to keep a promise made to an outworlder. At best. . . .

Hoy!

The canopy slid back. Tom got a look at the plane's interior. There was room for two in the cockpit, if one scrooched, and aft of the seat was a rack of—something or other, he couldn't see what, but it didn't seem welded in place. His pulses leaped.

The pilot emerged, in a dive, flattening himself at once behind a fallen tree. Weyer had said, after several fruitless attempts to get a reply from Tom: "You in the ship! You killed one of ours. Another, and your whole ship goes. Do you seize me?" (That must mean "understand.") Next, to the flyboy: "Fish Aran, use own discretion."

So the young man, deciding he couldn't sit where he was forever, was trying to reach the woods. That took nerve. Tom laid his telescope to his good eye—his faceplate was open—and searched out details. Fiber helmet, as already noted; green tunic with cloth insignia, no metal; green trousers tucked into leather boots; a sidearm, but no indication of a portable communicator or, for that

matter, a watch. Tom made sure his transmitter was off, trod a little further out in the lock chamber, and bawled from lungs that had often shouted against a gale at sea:

"Halt where you are! Or I'll chop the legs from under you!"

The pilot had been about to scuttle from his place. He froze. Slowly, he raised his gaze. Tom's armored shape was apparent to him, standing in the open lock, but not discernible by his mates. Likewise the blaster Tom aimed. The pilot's hand hovered at the butt of his own weapon.

"Slack off, son," the captain advised. "You wouldn't come near me with that pipgun—I said 'pip,' not even 'pop'—before I sizzled you. And I don't want to. C'mon and let's talk. That's right; on your feet; stroll over here and use this nice ladder."

The pilot obeyed, though his scramble across the log jam was hardly a stroll. As he started up, Tom said: "They'll see in a minute what you're doin', I s'pose, when you come above the foliage. . . . Belay, there, *I* can see you quite well already. . . . I want you to draw your gun, as if you'd decided to come aboard and reconnoiter 'stead o' headin' for the nearest beer hall. Better not try shootin' at me, though. My friends'd cut you down."

The Hannoan paused a moment, rigid with outrage, before he yielded. His face, approaching, showed pale and wet in the first light. He swung himself into the lock chamber. For an instant, he and Tom stood with guns almost in each other's bellies. The spaceman's gauntleted left hand struck like a viper, edge on, and the Nikean weapon clattered to the deck.

"You—you broke my wrist!" The pilot lurched back, clutching his arm and wheezing.

"I think not. I gauge these things pretty good if I do say so myself. And I do. March on ahead o' me, please." Tom conducted his prisoner into the passageway, gathering the fallen pistol en route. It was a slugthrower, ingeniously constructed with a minimum of steel. Tom found the magazine release and pressed it one-handed. The clip held ten high-caliber bullets. But what the hoo-hah! The cartridge cases were wood, the slugs appeared to be some heavy ceramic, with a mere skirt of soft metal for the rifling in the barrel to get a grip on!

"No wonder you came along meek-like," Tom said. "You never could've dented me."

The prisoner looked behind him. Footfalls echoed emptily around his words. "I think you are alone," he said.

"Aye-ya. I told you my chums *could* wiff you . . . if they were present. In here." Tom indicated the fire control turret. "Sit yourself. Now, I'm goin' 'tother side o' this room and shuck my armor, which is too hot and heavy for informal wear. Don't get ideas about plungin' across the deck at me. I can snatch my blaster and take aim quicker'n that."

The young man crouched in a chair and shuddered. His eyes moved like a trapped animal's, around and around the crowding machines. "What do you mean to do?" he rattled. "You can't get free. You're alone. Soon the Engineer's soldiers come, with 'tillery, and ring you."

"I know. We should be gone by then, however. Look here, uh, what's your name?"

An aristocrat's pride firmed the voice. "Yanos Aran, third son of Rober Aran, who's chief computerman to Engineer Weyer's self. I am a fish in the air force of Hanno—and you are a dirty friend!"

"Maybe so. Maybe not." Tom stripped fast, letting the pieces lie where they fell. He hated to abandon his suit, but it was too bulky and perhaps too detectable for his latest scheme.

"Why not? Didn't you business Evin Sato?"

"You mean that plane I gunned?"

"Yes. Evin Sato was my camarado."

"Well, I'm sorry about that, but wasn't he fixin' to shoot two o' my people? We came down frien—intendin' no harm, and you set on us like hungry eels. I don't want to hurt you, Yanos, lad. In fact, I hope betwixt us we can maybe settle this whole affair. But—" Tom's features assumed their grimmest look, which had terrified stronger men than Aran—"you try any fumblydiddles and you'll find out things about friendship that your mother never told you."

The boy seemed to crumple. "I . . . yes, I slave me to you," he whispered.

He wouldn't stay crumpled long, Tom knew. He must be the scion of a typical knightly class. Let him recover from the dismay of the past half hour, the unbalancing effect of being surrounded by unknown powers, and he'd prove a dangerous pet. It was necessary to use him while he remained useable.

Wherefore Tom, having peeled down to coveralls, gave him his orders in a few words. A slight demurral fetched a brutal cuff to the cheek. "And if I shoot you with this blaster, short range, low intensity," Tom added, "you won't have a neat hole drilled through

your heart. You'll be cooked alive, medium rare, so you'll be some days about dyin'. Seize me?"

He didn't know if he'd really carry out his threat, come worst to worst. Probably not.

Having switched off the tractor beam, he brought Aran far down into the ship, to an emergency lock near the base. It was well hidden by leaves. The vague dawnlight aided concealment. They crept forth, and thence to the captured aircraft.

It had taken a beating, Tom saw. The wingtips were crumpled, the fuselage punctured. (The covering was mostly some fluorosynthetic. What a metal shortage they must have here!) But it ought to fly anyhow, after a fashion. Given a gravity drive, however weak, airfoils were mainly for auxiliary lift and control.

"In we go," Tom said. He squeezed his bulky form behind Aran's seat so that it concealed him. The blaster remained in his fist, ready to fire through the back.

But there was no trouble. Aran followed instructions. He called his squadron:"—Yes, you're right, I did 'cide I'd try looking at the ship. And no one! None aboard. 'Least, none I saw. Maybe robos fought us, or maybe the rest of the crew got away on foot, not seen. I found a switch, looked like a main powerline breaker, and opened it. Maybe now I can rise."

And he started the engine. The airboat climbed, wobbling on its damaged surfaces. A cheer sounded from the receiver. Tom wished he could see the face in the screen, but he dared not risk being scanned himself.

"You land, if Engineer Weyer approves," Aran directed. "Go aboard. Be careful. Me, best I take my craft back to base immediately."

Tom had figured that would be a natural move for a pilot on Nike, even a squadron leader. A plane was obviously precious. It couldn't get to the repair shop too fast.

He must now hope that Aran's expression and tone didn't give him away. The "fish" was no actor. But everyone was strung wire-taut. Nobody noticed how much more perturbed this fellow was. After a few further words had passed, Aran signed off and started west.

"Keep low," Tom said. "Like you can't get much altitude. Soon's you're out o' their sight here, swing north. Find us a good secret place to land. I think we got a bucketful to say to each other, no?"

One craft was bound eagerly down. The rest stayed at hover. They'd soon learn that the spaceship was, indeed, deserted. Hence

they wouldn't suspect what had happened to Aran until he failed to report. However, that wasn't a long time. He, Roan Tom, had better get into a bolthole quick!

IX

THE VOLCANO'S NORTHERN SIDE was altogether wild. On the lower flanks, erosion had created a rich lava soil and vegetation was dense. For some reason it was principally native Nikean, dominated by primitive but tree-sized "ferns." An antigrav flyer could push its way under their soft branches and come to rest beneath the overhang of a cliff, camouflaged against aerial search.

Tom climbed out of the cockpit and stretched to uncramp himself. The *abris* was rough stone at his back, the forest brooded shadowy before him. Flecks of copper sunlight on bluish-green fronds and the integuments of bumbling giant pseudo-insects made the scene look as if cast in metal. But water rilled nearby, and the smells of damp growth were organic enough.

"C'mon, son. Relax with me," Tom invited. "I won't eat you. 'Specially not if you've packed along a few sandwiches."

"Food? No." Yanos Aran spoke as stiffly as he moved.

"Well, then we'll have to make do with what iron rations I got in my pockets." Tom sighed. He flopped down on a chair-sized boulder, took out pipe and tobacco pouch, and consoled himself with smoke.

He needed consolation. He was a fugitive on an unknown planet. His ship had been taken. His wives were out of touch; an attempt to raise Dagny on the plane's transmitter, using the Krakener military band, had brought silence. She must already have discarded her telltale space armor.

"And all 'count of a stupid lingo mistake!" he groaned.

Aran sat down on another rock and regarded him with eyes in which alertness was replacing fear. "You say you are not truly our friend?"

"Not in your sense. Look, where I come from, the Anglic word 'friend' means . . . well, a fellow you like, and who likes you. When I told your Engineer we were friends, I wanted him to understand we

didn't aim at any harm, in fact we could do good business with him."

"Business!" Aran exploded.

"Whoops-la. Sorry. Said the wrong thing again, didn't I?"

"I think," Aran replied slowly, "what you have in mind is what we would call 'change.' You wanted to 'change goods and services with our people. And to you, a 'friend' is what we call a 'camarado.' "

"Reckon so. What're your definitions?"

"A friend is a space raider, such as did business with our planet some five years agone. They destroyed the last great cities we had left from the Terran Empire days, and none knows how many million Nikeans they killed."

"Ah, now we're gettin' somewhere. Let's straighten out for me what did happen."

Aran's hostility had not departed, but it had disminished. He was intelligent and willing to cooperate within the limits of loyalty to his own folk. Information rushed out of him.

Nike did not appear to be unique, except in its planetology. Tom asked about that. Aran was surprised. Was his world so unusual per se?

He knew only vague traditions and a few fragmentary written accounts of other planetary systems. Nike was discovered and colonized five hundred-odd years ago—about a thousand standard years. It was always a backwater. Fundamentally agricultural because of its shortage of heavy metals, it had no dense population, no major libraries or schools. Thus, when the Empire fell apart, knowledge vanished more quickly and thoroughly here than most places. Nikean society disintegrated; what had been an Imperial sub-province became hundreds of evanescent kingdoms, fiefs and tribes.

The people were on their way back, Aran added defiantly. Order and a measure of prosperity had been restored in the advanced countries. As yet, they paid mere lip service to an "Emperor," but the concept of global government did now exist. Technology was improving. Ancient apparatus was being repaired and put back into service, or being reproduced on the basis of what diagrams and manuals could be found. Schemes had been broached for making interplanetary ships. Some dreamers had hoped that in time the Nikeans might end their centuries-long isolation themselves, by re-inventing the lost theory and practice of hyperdrive.

For that, of course, as for much else, the tinkering of technicians was insufficient. Basic scientific research must be done. But this was

also slowly being started. Had not Aran remarked that his father was head computerman in the Engineer's court? He used a highly sophistocated machine which had survived to the present day and which two generations of modern workers had finally learned how to operate.

Its work at present was mainly in astronomy. While some elementary nucleonics had been preserved through the dark ages—being essential to the maintenance of what few atomic power plants remained—practically all information about the stars had vanished. Today's astronomers had learned that their sun (as distinguished from their planet) was not typical of its neighborhood. It was unpredictably variable, and not even its ground state could be fitted onto the main sequence diagram. No one had yet developed a satisfactory theory as to what made this sun abnormal, but the consensus was that it must be quite a young star.

One geologist had proposed checking this idea by establishing the age of the planet. Radioactive minerals should provide a clock. The attempt had failed, partly because of the near-non-existence of isotopes with suitable half-lives and partly, Tom suspected, because of lousy laboratory technique. But passing references in old books did seem to confirm the idea held by latterday theorists, that stars and planets condensed out of interstellar gas and dust. If so, Nike's sun could be very new, as cosmic time went, and not yet fully stabilized.

"Aye, I'd guess that myself," Tom nodded.

"Good! Important to be sure. You seize, can we make a mathematical model of our sun, then we can predict its variations. Right? And we will never predict our weather until then. Unforeseen storms are our greatest natural woe. Hanno's self, a southerly land, can get killing frosts any season."

"Well, don't take my authority, son. I'm no scientist. The Imperialists must've known for sure what kind o'star they had here. And a scholar of astronomy, from a planet where they still keep universities and such, should could tell you. But not me." Tom struck new fire to his pipe. "Uh, we'd better stay with less fun topics. Like those 'friends.' "

Aran's enthusiasm gave way to starkness. He could relate little. The raiders had not come in any large fleet, a dozen ships at most. But there was no effective opposition to them. They smashed defenses from space, landed, plundered, raped, tortured, burned, during a nightmare of weeks. After sacking a major city, they missiled it. They

were human, their language another dialect of Anglic. Whether in sarcasm or hypocrisy or because of linguistic change, they described themselves to the Nikeans as "your friends, come to do business with you." Since "friend" and "business" had long dropped out of the local speech, Tom saw the origin of their present meaning here.

"Do you know who they might have been?" Aran asked. His tone was thick with unshed tears.

"No. Not sure. Space's full o' their kind." Tom refrained from adding that he too wasn't above a bit of piracy on occasion. After all, he observed certain humane rules with respect to those whom he relieved of their portable goods. The really bestial types made his flesh crawl, and he'd exterminated several gangs of them with pleasure.

"Will they return, think you?"

"Well . . . prob'ly not. I'd reckon they destroyed your big population centers to make sure no one else'd be tempted to come here and start a base that might be used against 'em. They bein' too few to conquer a whole world, you see. 'Course, I wouldn't go startin' major industries and such again without husky space defenses."

"No chance. We hide instead," Aran said bitterly. "Most leaders dare allow naught that might draw other friends. Radio a bare minimum; no rebuilding of cities; yes, we crawl back to our dark age and cower."

"I take it you don't pers'nally agree with that policy."

Aran shrugged. "What matter my thoughts? I am but a third son. The chiefs of the planet have 'cided. They fought a war or two, forcing the rest to go with them in this. I myself bombed soldiers of Silva, when its Prester was made stop building a big atomic power plant. Our neighbor cavedom! And we had to fight them, not the friends!"

Tom wasn't shocked. He'd seen human politics get more hashed than that. What pricked his ears up was the information that, right across the border, lived a baron who couldn't feel overly kindly toward Engineer Weyer.

"You can seize, now, why we feared you," Aran said.

"Aye-ya. A sad misunderstandin'. If you hadn't been so bloody implusive, though—if you'd been willin' to talk—we'd've quick seen what the lingo problem was."

"No! You were the ones who refused to talk. When the Engineer called on you to be slaves—"

"What the muck did he expect us to do after that?" Tom rumbled. "Wear his chains?"

"Chains? Why . . . wait—oh-oh!"

"Oh-oh, for sure," Tom said. "Another little shift o' meaning', huh? All right, what does 'slave' signify to you?"

It turned out that, on Nike, to be "enslaved" was nothing more than to be taken into custody: perhaps as a prisoner, perhaps merely for interrogation or protection. In Hanno, as in every advanced Nikean realm, slavery in Tom's sense of the word had been abolished a lifetime ago.

The two men stared at each other. "Events got away from both sides," Tom said. "After what'd happened when last spacemen came, you were too spooked to give us a chance. You reckoned you had to get us under guard right away. And we reacted to that. We've seen a lot o' cruelty and treachery. We couldn't trust ourselves to complete strangers, 'specially when they acted hostile. So . . . neither side gave the other time to think out the busi—the matter o' word shift. If there'd been a few minutes' pause in the action, I think I, at least, would've guessed the truth. I've seen lots o' similar cases. But I never had any such pause, till now."

He grinned and extended a broad hard hand. "All's well that ends well, I'm told," he said. "Let's be camarados."

Aran ignored the gesture. The face he turned to the outworlder was only physically youthful. "We cannot," he said. "You wrecked a plane and stole another. Worse, you killed a man of ours."

"But—well, self-defense!"

"I might pardon you," Aran said. "I do not think the Engineer would or could. It is more than the damage you worked. More than the anger of the powerful Sato family, who like it not if a son of theirs dies unavenged because of a comic mix in s'mantics. It is the policy that he, Weyer's self, strove to bring."

"You mean . . . nothin' good can come from outer space . . . wall Nike off . . . treat anyone that comes as hostile . . . right?" Tom rubbed his chin and scowled sullenly.

Weyer was probably not too dogmatic, nor too tightly bound by the isolationist treaty, to change his mind in time. But Tom had scant time to spare. Every hour that passed, he and his womenfolk risked getting shot down by some hysteric. Also, a bunch of untrained Nikeans, pawing over his spaceship, could damage her beyond the capacity of this planet's industry to repair.

Also, he was needed back on Kraken *soon*, or his power there would crumble. And that would be a mortally dangerous situation for his other wives, children, grandchildren, old and good comrades. . . .

In short, there was scant value in coming to terms with Weyer eventually. He needed to reach agreement fast. And, after what had happened this day, he didn't see how he could.

Well, the first thing he must do was reunite his party. Together, they might accomplish something. If nothing else, they could seek refuge in the adjacent country, Silva. Though that was doubtless no very secure place for them, particularly if Weyer threatened another war.

"You should slave yourself," Aran urged. "Afterward you can talk."

"As a prisoner—a slave—I'd have precious little bargainin' leverage," Tom said. "Considerin' what that last batch o' spacers did, I can well imagine we bein' tortured till I cough up for free everything I've got to tell. S'posin' Weyer himself didn't want to treat me so inhospitable, he could break down anyhow under pressure from his court or his fellow bosses."

"It may be," Aran conceded, reluctantly, but too idealistic at his age to violate the code of his class and lie.

"Whereas if I can stay loose, I can try a little pressure o' my own. I can maybe find somethin' to offer that's worth makin' a deal with me. That'd even appease the Sato clan, hm?" Tom fumed on his pipe. "I've got to contact my women. Right away. Can't risk their fallin' into Weyer's hands. If they do, he's got me! Know any way to raise a couple o' girls who don't have a radio and 're doin' their level best to disappear?"

X

SUNSET RAYS TURNED THE HILLTOPS FIERY. Further down, the land was already blue with a dusk through which river, bay, and distant sea glimmered argent. Cloud banks towered in the east, blood-colored, dwarfing the Sawtooth Mountains that marked Hanno's frontier.

At the lowest altitude where this was visible—the highest to which a damaged, overloaded flyer could limp—the air was savagely cold. It wasn't too thin for breathing; the atmospheric density gradient is less for small than for large planets. But it swept through the cracked canopy to sear Tom's nostrils and numb his fingers on the board. Above the drone of the combustion powerplant, he heard Yanos Aran's teeth clatter. Stuffed behind the pilot chair, the boy might have tried to mug his captor. But he wasn't dressed for this temperature and was chilled half insensible. Tom's clothes were somewhat warmer. Besides, he felt he could take on any two Nikeans hand-to-hand.

The controls of the plane were simple to a man who'd used as wide a variety of machines as he. Trickiness came from the broken and twisted airfoil surfaces. And, of course, he must keep a watch for Weyer's boys. He didn't think they'd be aloft, nor that they could scramble and get here in the few minutes he needed. But you never knew. If one did show up, maybe Tom could pot him with a lucky blast from the guns.

He swung through another carousel curve. That should be that. Now to skate away. He throttled the engine back. The negafield dropped correspondingly, and he went into a glide. But he was no longer emitting enough exhaust for a visible trail.

The tracks he had left were scribbled over half the sky. The sun painted them gold-orange against that deepening purple.

Abruptly, turbulence across the buckled delta wing gained mastery. The glide became a tailspin. Aran yelled.

"Hang on," Tom said. "I can ride 'er."

Crazily whirling, the dark land rushed at him. He stopped Aran's attempt to grab the stick with a karate chop and concentrated on his altimeter. At the last possible moment, allowing for the fact that he must coddle this wreck lest he tear her apart altogether, he pulled out of his tumble. A prop, jet or rocket would never have made it, but you could do special things with gravs if you had the knack in your fingers. Or whatever part of the anatomy it was.

Finally the plane whispered a few meters above the bay. Its riding lights were doused, and the air here was too warm for engine vapor to condense. Tom believed his passage had a fair chance of going unnoticed.

Hills shouldered black around the water. Here and there among them twinkled house lamps. One cluster bespoke a village on the

shore. Tom's convoluted contrail was breaking up, but slowly. It glowed huge and mysterious, doubtless frightening peasants and worrying the military.

Aran stared at it likewise, as panic and misery left him. "I thought you wrote a message to your camarados," he said. "That's no writing."

"Couldn't use your alphabet, son, seein' I had to give 'em directions to a place with a local name. Could I, now? Even Kraken's letters look too much like yours. But those're Momotaroan phonograms. Dagny can read 'em. I hope none o' Weyer's folk'll even guess it is a note. Maybe they'll think I went out o' control tryin' to escape and, after staggerin' around a while, crashed. . . . Now, which way is this rendezvous?"

"Rendez—oh. The togethering I advised. Follow the north shore eastward a few more kilos. At the end of a headland stands Orgino's Cave."

"You absolutely sure nobody'll be there?"

"As sure as may be; and you have me for hostage. Orgino was a war chief of three hundred years agone. They said he was so wicked he must be in pact with the Wanderer, and to this day the commons think he walks the ruins of his cave. But it's a landmark. Let your camarados ask shrewdly, and they can find how to get there with none suspecting that for their wish."

The plane sneaked onward. Twilight was short in this thin air. Stars twinkled splendidly forth, around the coalsack of the Nebula. The outer moon rose, gradually from the eastern cloudbanks, almost full but its disk tiny and corroded-bronze dark. An auroral glow flickered. This far south? Well, Nike had a fairly strong magnetic field—which, with the mean density, showed that it possessed the ferrous core it wasn't supposed to—but not so much that charged solar particles couldn't strike along its sharp curvature clear to the equator.

If they were highly energetic particles, anyhow. And they must be. Tom had identified enormous spots as well as flares on that ruddy sun disk. Which oughtn't to be there! Not even when output was rising. A young star, its outer layers cool and reddish because they were still contracting, shouldn't have such intensity. Should it?

Regardless, Nike's sun did.

Well, Tom didn't pretend to know every kind of star. His travels had really not been so extensive, covering single corner of the old Imperium, which itself had been insignificant compared to the whole galaxy. And his attention had naturally always been focused on more

or less Sol-type stars. He didn't know what a very young or very old, very large or very small sun was like in detail.

Most certainly he didn't know what the effects of abnormal chemical composition might be. And the distribution of elements in this system was unlike that of any other Tom had ever heard about. Conditions on Nike bore out what spectroanalysis had indicated in space: impoverishment with respect to heavy elements. Since it had formed recently, the sun and its planets must therefore have wandered here from some different region. Its velocity didn't suggest that. However, Tom hadn't determined the galactic orbit with any precision. Besides, it might have been radically changed by a close encounter with another orb. Improbable as the deuce, yes, but then the whole crazy situation was very weird.

The headland loomed before him, and battlements against the Milky Way. Tom made a vertical landing in a courtyard. "All right." His voice sounded jarringly loud. "Now we got nothin' much to do but wait."

"What if they come not?" Aran asked.

"I'll given 'em a day or two," Tom said. "After that, we'll see." He didn't care to dwell on the possibility. His unsentimental soul was rather astonished to discover how big a part of it Dagny had become. And Yasmin was a good kid, he wished her well.

He left the crumbling flagstones for a walk around the walls. Pseudo-moss grew damp and slippery on the parapet. Once mail-clad spearmen had tramped their rounds here, and the same starlight sheened on their helmets as tonight, or as in the still more ancient, vanished glory of the Empire, or the League before it, or—And what of the nights yet to come? Tom shied from the thought and loaded his pipe.

Several hours later, the nearer moon rose from the hidden sea; its apparent path was retrograde and slow. Although at half phase, with an angular diameter of a full degree it bridged the bay with mercury.

Rising at the half—local midnight, more or less—would the girls never show? He ought to get some sleep. His eyelids were sandy. Aran had long since gone to rest in the tumbledown keep. He must be secured, of course, before Tom dozed off. . . *No. I couldn't manage a snooze even if I tried. Where are you, Dagny?*

The cold wind lulled, the cold waves lapped, a winged creature fluttered and whistled. Tom sat down where a portcullis had been and stared into the woods beyond.

There came a noise. And another. Branches rustled. Hoofbeats clopped. Tom drew his blaster and slid into the shadow of a tower. Two riders on horseback emerged from the trees. For a moment they were unrecognizable, unreal. Then the moon . . . slight struck Dagny's tawny mane. Tom shouted.

Dagny snatched her own gun forth. But when she saw who lumbered toward her, it fell into the rime-frosted grass.

XI

AFTERWARD, IN WHAT HAD BEEN A FEASTING HALL, with a flashlight from the aircraft to pick faces out of night, they conferred. "No, we had no trouble," Dagny said. "The farmer sold us those animals without any fuss."

"If you gave him a thirty-gram gold piece, on this planet, I reckon so." Tom said. "You could prob'ly've gooten his house thrown into the deal. He's bound to gossip about you, though."

"That can't be helped," Dagny said. "Our idea was to keep traveling east and hide in the woods when anyone happened by. But we'd no strong hope, especially with that wide cultivated valley to get across. Tom, dear, when I saw your sky writing, it was the second best moment of my life."

"What was the first?"

"You were involved there too," she said. "Rather often, in fact."

Yasmin stirred. She sat huddled on the floor, chilled, exhausted, wretched, though nonetheless drawing Aran's appreciative gaze. "Why do you grin at each other?" she wailed. "We're hunted!"

"Tell me more," Tom said.

"What can we *do?*"

"You can shut up, for the gods' sake, and keep out o' my way!" he snapped impatiently. She shrank from him and knuckled her eyes.

"Be gentle," Dagny said. "She's only a child."

"She'll be a dead child if we don't get out o' here, " Tom retorted. "We got time before dawn to slip across the Silvan border in yon airboat. After that, we'll have to play 'er as she lies. But I been

pumping' my—shall I say, my friend, about politics and geography and such. I think with luck we got a chance o' stayin' free."

"What chance of getting our ship back, and repaired?" Dagny asked.

"Well, that don't look so good, but maybe somethin'll come down the slot for us. Meanwhile, let's move."

They went back to the courtyard. The inner moon was so bright that no supplement was needed for the job on hand. This was to unload the extra fuel tanks, which were racked aft of the cockpit. The plane would lose cruising range, would indeed be unable to go past the eastern slope of the Sawtooths. But it would gain room for two passengers.

"You stay behind, natural," Tom told Aran. "You been a nice lad, and here's where I prove I never aimed at any hurt for you. Have a horse on me, get a boat from the village to Weyer's place, tell him what happened—and to tell him we want to be his camarados and 'change with him."

"I can say it." Aran shifted awkwardly from foot to foot. "I think no large use comes from my word."

"The prejudice against spacemen—"

"And the damage you worked. How shall you repay that? Since 'tis been 'cited there's no good in spacefaring, I expect your ship'll be stripped for its metal."

"Try, though," Tom urged.

"Should you leave not?" Aran wondered. "Weather looks twisty."

"Aye, we'd better. But thanks for frettin' 'bout it."

A storm, Tom thought, was the least of his problems. True, conditions did look fanged about the mountains. But he could sit down and wait them out, once over the border, which ought to remain in the bare fringes of the tempest. Who ever heard of weather moving very far west, on the western seacoast of a planet with rotation like this? What was urgent was to get beyond Weyer's pursuit.

Yasmin and Dagny fitted themselves into the rear fuselage as best they could, which wasn't very. Tom took the pilot's seat again. He waved good-by to Yanos Aaran and gunned the engine. Overburdened as well as battered, the plane lifted sluggishly and made no particular speed. But it flew, and could be out of Hanno before dawn. That sufficed.

Joy at reunion, vigilance against possible enemies, concentration

on the difficult task of operating his cranky vessel, drove weariness out of him. He paid scant attention to the beauties of the landscape sliding below, though they were considerable—mist-magical delta, broad sweep of valley, river's sinuous glow, all white under the moons. He must be one with the wind that blew across this sleeping land.

And blew.

Harder.

The plane bucked. The noise around it shrilled more and more clamorous. Though the cloud wall above the mountains must be a hundred kilometers distant, it was suddenly boiling zenithward with unbelievable speed.

It rolled over the peaks and hid them. Its murk swallowed the outer moon and reached tendrils forth for the inner one. Lightning blazed in its caverns. Then the first raindrops were hurled against the plane. Hail followed, and the snarl of a hurricane.

East wind! Couldn't be! Tom had no further chance to think. He was too busy staying alive.

As if across parsecs, he heard Yasmin's scream, Dagny's profane orders that she curb herself. Rain and hail made the cockpit a drum, himself a cockroach trapped between the skins. The wind was the tuba of marching legions. Sheathing ripped loose from wings and tail. Now and then he could see through the night, when lightning burned. The thunder was like bombs, one after the next, a line of them seeking him out. What followed was doomsday blackness.

His instrument panel went dark. His altitude control stick waggled loose in his hand. The airflaps must be gone, the vessel whirled leaf-fashion on the wind. Tom groped until his fingers closed on the grav-drive knobs. By modulating fields and thrust beams, he could keep a measure of command. Just a measure; the powerplant had everything it could do to lift this weight, without guiding it. But let him get sucked down to earth, that was the end!

He must land somehow, and survive the probably hard impact. How?

The river flashed lurid beneath him. He tried to follow its course. Something real, in this raving night—There was no more inner moon, there were no more stars.

The plane groaned, staggered, and tilted on its side. The starboard wing was torn off. Had the port one gone too, Tom might have operated the fuselage as a kind of gravity sled. But against forces as

unbalanced as now fought him, he couldn't last more than a few seconds. Minutes, if he was lucky.

Must be back above the rivermouths, thought the tiny part of him that stood aside and watched the struggle of the rest. *Got to set down easy-like. And find some kind o' shelter. Yasmin wouldn't last out this night in the open.*

Harshly: *Will she last anyway? Is she anything but a dangerous drag on us? I can't abandon her, I swore her an oath, but I almost wish–*

The sky exploded anew with lightnings and showed him a wide vista of channels among forested, swampy islands. Trees tossed and roared in the wind, but the streams were too narrow for great waves to build up and—Hoy!

Suddenly, disastrously smitten, a barge train headed from Sea Gate to the upriver towns had broken apart. In the single blazing moment of vision that he had, Tom saw the tug itself reel toward safety on the northern side of the main channel. Its tow was scattered, some members sinking, some flung aground, and one—yes, driven into a tributary creek, woods and waterplants closing behind it, screening it—

Tom made this decision.

He hoped for nothing more than a bellyflop in the drink, a scramble to escape from the plane and a swim to the barge. But lightning flamed again and again, enormous sheets of it that turned every raindrop and hailstone into brass. And once he was down near the surface of that natural canal, a wall of trees on either side, he got some relief. He was actually able to land on deck.

The barge had ended on a sandbar and lay solid and stable. Tom led his women from the plane. He and Dagny found some rope and lashed their remnant of a vehicle into place. The cargo appeared to be casks of petroleum. A hatch led below, to a cabin where a watchman might rest. Tom's flashlight picked out bunk, chair, a stump of candle.

"We're playin' a good hand," he said.

"For how long?" Dagny mumbled.

"Till the weather slacks off." Tom shrugged. "What comes after that, I'm too tired to care. I don't s'pose . . . gods, yes!" he whooped. "Here, on the shelf!" A bottle—lemme sniff—aye-ya, booze! Got to be booze!" And he danced upon the deckboards till be cracked his pate on the low overhead.

Yasmin regarded him with a dull kind of wonder. "What are you so

happy about?" she asked in Anglic. When he had explained, she slumped. "You can laugh . . . at that . . . tonight? Lord Tom, I did not know how alien you are to me."

Through hours the storm continued.

They sat crowded together, the three of them, in the uneasy candlelight, which threw huge misshapen shadows across the roughness of bulkheads. Rather, Dagny sat on the chair, Tom on the foot of the bunk, while Yasmin lay. The wind-noise was muffled down here, but the slap of water on hull came loud. From time to time, thunder cannonaded, or the barge rocked and grated on the sandbar.

Wet, dirty, haggard, the party looked at each other. "We should try to sleep," Dagny said.

"Not while I got this bottle," Tom said. "You do what you like. Me, though, I think we'd better guzzle while we can. Prob'ly won't be long, you see."

"Probably not," Dagny agreed, and took another pull herself.

"What will we do?" Yasmin whispered.

Tom suppressed exasperation—she had done a good job in Petar Landa's house, if nowhere else—and said, "Come mornin', we head into the swamps. I s'pose Weyer'll send his merry men lookin' for us, and whoever owns this hulk'll search after it, so we can't claim squatter's rights. Maybe we can live off the country, though, and eventually, one way or another, reach the border."

"Would it not be sanest . . . they do seem to be decent folk . . . should we not surrender to them and hope for mercy?"

"Go ahead, if you want," Tom said. "You may or may not get the mercy. But you'll for sure have no freedom. I'll stay my own man."

Yasmin tried to meet his hard gaze, and failed. "What has happened to us?" she pleaded.

He suspected that she meant, "What has become of the affection between you and me?" No doubt he should comfort her. But he didn't have the strength left to play father image. Trying to distract her a little, he said, with calculated misunderstanding of her question:

"Why, we hit a storm that blew us the exact wrong way. It wasn't s'posed to. But this's such a funny planet. I reckon, given a violent kind o' sun, you can get weather that whoops out o' the east, straight seaward. And, o' course, winds can move almighty fast when the air's thin. Maybe young Aran was tryin' to warn me. He spoke o' twisty weather. Maybe he meant exactly this, and I got fooled once more by his Nikean lingo. Or maybe he just meant what I believed he did,

unreliable weather. He told me himself, their meteorology isn't worth sour owl spit, 'count o' they can't predict the solar output. Young star, you know. Have a drink."

Yasmin shook her head. But abruptly she sat straight. "Have you something to write with?"

"Huh?" Tom gaped at her. "I have an idea. It is worthless," she said humbly, "but since I cannot sleep, and do not wish to annoy my lord, I would like to pass the time."

"Oh. Sure." Tom found a pad and penstyl in a breast pocket of his coverall and gave them to her. She crossed her legs and began writing numbers in a neat, foreign-looking script.

"What's going on?" Dagny said in Eylan.

Tom explained. The older woman frowned. "I don't like this, dear," she said. "Yasmin's been breaking down, closer and closer to hysteria, ever since we left those peasants. She's not prepared for a guerrilla existence. She's used up her last resources."

"You reckon she's quantum-jumpin' already?"

"I don't know. But I do think we should force her to take a drink, to put her to sleep."

"Hm." Tom glanced at the dark head, bent over some arithmetical calculations. "Could be. But no. Let her do what she chooses. She hasn't bubbled her lips yet, has she? And—we are the free people."

He went on with Dagny in a rather hopeless discussion of possibilities open to them. Once they were interrupted, when Yasmin asked if he had a trigonometric slide rule. No, he didn't. "I suppose I can approximate the function with a series," she said, and returned to her labors.

Has she really gone gollywobble? Tom wondered. *Or is she just soothin' herself with a hobby?*

Half an hour later, Yasmin spoke again. "I have the solution."

"To what?" Tom asked, a little muzzily after numerous gulps from the bottle. They distilled potent stuff in Hanno. "Our problem?"

"Oh, no, my lord. I couldn't—I mean, I am nobody. But I did study science, you remember, and . . . and I assumed that if you and Lady Dagny said this was a young system, you must be right, you have traveled so widely. But it isn't."

"No? What're you aimed at?"

"It doesn't matter, really. I'm being an awful picky little nuisance. But this *can't* be a young system. It has to be old."

Tom put the bottle down with a thud that overrode the storm-

yammer outside. Dagny opened her mouth to ask what was happening. He shushed her. Out of the shadows across his scarred face, the single eye blazed blue. "Go on," he said, most quietly.

Yasmin faltered. She hadn't expected any such reaction. But, encouraged by him, she said with a waxing confidence:

"From the known average distance of the sun, and the length of the planet's year, anyone can calculate the sun's mass. It turns out to be almost precisely one Sol. That is, it has the mass of a G_2 star. But it has twice the luminosity, and more than half again the radius, and the reddish color of a late G or early K type. You thought those paradoxes were due to a strange composition. I don't really see how that could be. I mean, any star is something like 98 per cent hydrogen and helium. Variations in other elements can affect its development some, but surely not this much. Well, we know from Nikean biology that this system must be at least a few billion years old. So the star's instability cannot be due to extreme youth. Any solar mass must settle down on the main sequence far quicker than that. Otherwise we would have many, many more variables in the universe than we do.

"And besides, we can explain all the paradoxes so simply if we assume this system is old. Incredibly old, maybe almost as old as the galaxy itself."

"Belay!" Tom exclaimed, though not loudly. "How could this planet have this much atmosphere after so long a time? Or any? Don't sunlight kick gases into space? And Nike hasn't got the gravity to nail molecules down for good. Half a standard gee; and the potential is even poorer, the field strength droppin' off as fast as it does."

"But my lord," Yasmin said, "an atmosphere comes from within a planet. At least, it does for the smaller planets, that can't keep their original hydrogen like the Jupiter types. On the smaller worlds, gas gets forced out of mineral compounds. Vulcanism and tectonism provide the heat for that, as well as radioactivity. But the major planetological forces originate in the core. And a core originates because the heavier elements, like iron, tend to migrate toward the center. We know Nike has some endowment of those. Perhaps more, even, than the average planet of its age.

"Earth-sized planets have strong gravity. The migration is quick. But Mars-sized worlds . . . the process has to be slow, don't you think? So much iron combines first in surface rocks that they are red. Nike shows traces of this still today. The midget planets can't outgas

more than a wisp until their old age, when a core finally has taken shape."

Tom shook his head in a stunned fashion. "I didn't know. I took for granted—I mean, well, every Mars-type globe I ever saw or heard of had very little air—I reckoned they'd lost most o' their gas long ago."

"There are no extremely ancient systems in the range that your travels have covered," Yasmin deduced. "Perhaps not in the whole Imperial territory. They aren't common in the spiral arms of the galaxy, after all. So people never had much occasion to think about what they must be like."

"Uh, what you been sayin', this theory . . . learned it in school?"

"No. I didn't major in astronomy, just took some required basic courses. It simply appeared to me that some such idea is the only way to explain this system we're in." Yasmin spread her hands. "Maybe the professors at my university haven't heard of the idea either. The truth must have been known in Imperial times, but it could have been lost since, not having immediate practical value." Her smile was sad. "Who cares about pure science any more? What can you buy with it?

"Even the original colonists on Nike—Well, to them the fact must have been interesting, but not terribly important. They knew the planet was so old that it had lately gained an atmosphere and oxygen-liberating life. So old, that its sun is on the verge of becoming a red giant. Already the hydrogen is exhausted at the core, the nuclear reactions are moving outward in a shell, the photosphere is expanding and cooling while the total energy output rises. But the sun won't be so huge that Nike is scorched for—oh, several million years. I suppose the colonists appreciated the irony here. But on the human time-scale, what difference did it make? No wonder their descendants have forgotten and think, like you, this has to be a young system."

Tom caught her hands between his own. "And . . . that's the reason . . . the real reason the sun's so rambunctious?" he asked hoarsely.

"Why, yes. Red giants are usually variable. This star is in a transition stage, I guess, and hasn't 'found' its period yet." Yasmin's smile turned warm. "If I have taken your mind off your troubles, I am glad. But why do you care about the aspect of this planet ten megayears from now? I think best I do try to sleep, that I may help you a little tomorrow."

Tom gulped. "Kid," he said, "you don't know your own strength."
"What's she been talking about?" Dagny demanded.
Tom told her. They spent the rest of that night laying plans.

XII

NOW AND THEN A MID-MORNING SUNBEAM struck coppery through the fog. But otherwise a wet, dripping, smoking mystery enclosed the barge. Despite its chill, Tom was glad. He didn't care to be interrupted by a strafing attack.

To be sure, the air force might triangulate on the radio emission of his ruined plane and drop a bomb. However—

He sat in the cockpit, looked squarely into the screen, and said, "This is a parley. Agreed'?"

"For the moment." Karol Weyer gave him a smoldering return stare. "I talked with Fish Aran."

"And he made it clear to you, didn't he, about the lingo scramble? How often your Anglic and mine use the same word different? Well, let's not keep on with the farce. If anybody thinks 'tother's said something bad, let's call a halt and thresh out what was intended. Aye?"

Weyer tugged his beard. His countenance lost none of its sternness. "You have yet to prove your good faith," he said. "After what harm you worked—"

"I'm ready to make that up to you. To your whole planet."

Weyer cocked a brow and waited.

"S'pose you give us what we need to fix our ship," Tom said.

"Some of it might be kind of expensive—copper and silver and such, and handicrafted because you haven't got the dies and jigs—but we can make some gold payment. Then let us go. I, or a trusty captain o' mine, will be back in a few months . . . uh, a few thirty-day periods."

"With a host of friends to do business?"

"No. With camarados to 'change. Nike lived on trade under the Terran Empire. It can once more."

"How do I know you speak truth?"

"Well, you'll have to take somethin' on my word. But listen. Kind of a bad storm last night, no? Did a lot o' damage, I'll bet. How much less would've been done if you'd been able to predict it? I can make that possible." Tom paused before adding cynically, "You can share the information with all Nike, or keep it your national secret. Could be useful, if you feel like maybe the planet should have a really strong Emperor, name of Weyer, for instance."

The Engineer leaned forward till his image seemed about to jump from the screen. "How is this?"

Tom related what Yasmin had told him. "No wonder your solar meteorologists never get anywhere," he finished. "They're usin' exactly the wrong mathematical model."

Weyer's eyes dwelt long upon Tom. "Are you giving this information away in hopes of my good will?" he said.

"No. As a free sample, to shake you loose from your notion that every chap who drops in from space is necessarily a hound o' hell. And likewise this. Camarado Weyer, your astronomers'll tell you my wife's idea makes sense. They'll be right glad to hear they've got an old star. But they'll need many years to work out the details by themselves. You know enough science to realize that, I'm sure. Now I can put you in touch with people that *already* know the details—that can come here, study the situation for a few weeks, and predict your weather like dice odds.

"That's my hole card. And you can only benefit by helpin' us leave. Don't think you can catch us and beat what we know out of us. First, we haven't got the information. Second, we'll die before we become slaves, in any meanin' o' the word. If it don't look like we can get killed fightin' the men you send to catch us, why, we'll turn on our weapons on ourselves. Then all you've got is a spaceship that to you is nothin' but scrap metal."

Weyer drew a sharp breath. But he remained cautious. "This may be," he said. "Nonetheless, if I let you go, why should you bring learned people back to me?"

"Because it'll pay. I'm a trader and a warlord. The richer my markets, the stronger my allies, the better off I am." Tom punched a forefinger at the screen. "Get rid o' that conditioned reflex o' yours and think a bit instead. You haven't got much left that's worth anybody's lootin'. Why should I bother returnin' for that purpose? But your potential, that's somethin' else entirely. Given as simple a thing as reliable weather forecasts—you'll save, in a generation, more

wealth than the 'friends' ever destroyed. And this's only one for instance o' what the outside universe can do for you. Man, you can't afford not to trust me!"

They argued, back and forth, for a long time. Weyer was intrigued but wary. Granted, Yasmin's revelation did provide evidence that Tom's folk were not utter savages like the last visitors from space. But the evidence wasn't conclusive. And even if it was, what guarantee existed that the strangers would bring the promised experts?

The wrangle ended as well as Tom had hoped, in an uneasy compromise. He and his wives would be brought to Sea Gate. They'd keep their sidearms. Though guarded, they were to be treated more or less as guests. Discussions would continue. If Weyer judged, upon better acquaintance, that they were indeed trustworthy, he would arrange for the ship's repair and release.

"But don't be long about makin' up your mind," Tom warned, "or it won't do us a lot o' good to come home."

"Perhaps," Weyer said, "you can depart early if you leave a hostage."

"You'll be all right?" Tom asked for the hundredth time.

"Indeed, my lord," Yasmin said. She was more cheerful than he, bidding him good-by in the Engineer's castle. "I'm used to their ways by now, comfortable in this environment—honestly! And you know how much in demand an outworlder is."

"That could get dull. I won't be back too bloody soon, remember. What'll you do for fun?"

"Oh," she said demurely, "I plan to make arrangements with quite a number of men."

"Stop teasin' me." He hugged her close. "I'm goin' to miss you."

And so Roan Tom and Dagny Od's-daughter left Nike.

He fretted somewhat about Yasmin, while *Firedrake* made the long flight back to Kraken, and while he mended his fences there, and while he voyaged back with his scholars and merchants. Had she really been joking, at the very last? She'd for sure gotten almighty friendly with Yanos Aran, and quite a few other young bucks. Tom was not obsessively jealous, but he could not afford to become a laughing stock.

He needn't have worried. When he made his triumphant landing at Sea Gate, he found that Yasmin had been charming, plausible, devious and, in short, had convinced several feudal lords of Nike that it was to their advantage that the rightful Shah be restored to the

throne of Sassania. They commanded enough men to do the job. If the Krakeners could furnish weapons, training, and transporation—

Half delighted, half stunned, Tom said, "So this time we had a lingo scramble without somethin' horrible happenin'? I don't believe it!"

"Happy endings do occur," she murmured, and came to him. "As now."

And everyone was satisfied except, maybe, some few who went to lay a wreath upon a certain grave.

In the case of the King and Sir Christopher, however, a compliment was intended. A later era would have used the words "awe-inspiring, stately and ingeniously conceived."

Starfog

"FROM ANOTHER UNIVERSE. Where space is a shining cloud, two hundred light-years across, roiled by the red stars that number in the many thousands, and where the brighter suns are troubled and cast forth great flames. Your spaces are dark and lonely."

Daven Laure stopped the recording and asked for an official translation. A part of *Jaccavrie*'s computer scanned the molecules of a plugged-in memory cylinder, identified the passage, and flashed the Serievan text onto a reader screen. Another part continued the multitudinous tasks of planetary approach. Still other parts waited for the man's bidding, whatever he might want next. A Ranger of the Commonalty traveled in a very special ship.

And even so, every year, a certain number did not come home from their missions.

Laure nodded to himself. Yes, he'd understood the woman's voice correctly. Or, at least, he interpreted her sentences approximately the same way as did the semanticist who had interviewed her and her fellows. And this particular statement was as difficult, as ambiguous as any which they had made. Therefore: (a) Probably the linguistic computer on Serieve had done a good job of unraveling their basic language. (b) It had accurately encoded its findings—vocabulary, grammar, tentative reconstruction of the underlying world-view—in the cylinders which a courier had brought to Sector HQ. (c) The reencoding, into his own neurones, which Laure underwent on his way here, had taken well. He had a working knowledge of the tongue which—among how many others?—was spoken on Kirkasant.

"Wherever that may be," he muttered.

The ship weighed his words for a nanosecond or two, decided no answer was called for, and made none.

Restless, Laure got to his feet and prowled from the study cabin, down a corridor to the bridge. It was so called largely by courtesy. *Jaccavrie* navigated, piloted, landed, lifted, maintained, and, if need

be, repaired and fought herself. But the projectors here offered a full outside view. At the moment, the bulkheads seemed cramped and barren. Laure ordered the simulacrum activated.

The bridge vanished from his eyes. Had it not been for the G-field underfoot, he might have imagined himself floating in space. A crystal night enclosed him, unwinking stars scattered like jewels, the frosty glitter of the Milky Way. Large and near, its radiance stopped down to preserve his retinas, burned the yellow sun of Serieve. The planet itself was a growing crescent, blue banded with white, rimmed by a violet sky. A moon stood opposite, worn golden coin.

But Laure's gaze strayed beyond, toward the deeps and then, as if in search of comfort, the other way, toward Old Earth. There was no comfort, though. They still named her Home, but she lay in the spiral arm behind this one, and Laure had never seen her. He had never met anyone who had. None of his ancestors had, for longer than their family chronicles ran. Home was a half-remembered myth; reality was here, these stars on the fringes of this civilization.

Serieve lay near the edge of the known. Kirkasant lay somewhere beyond.

"Surely not outside of spacetime," Laure said.

"If you've begun thinking aloud, you'd like to discuss it," *Jaccavrie* said.

He had followed custom in telling the ship to use a female voice and, when practical, idiomatic language. The computer had soon learned precisely what pattern suited him best. That was not identical with what he liked best; such could have got disturbing on a long cruise. He found himself more engaged, inwardly, with the husky contralto that had spoken in strong rhythms out of the recorder than he was with the mezzo-soprano that now reached his ears.

"Well . . . maybe so," he said. "But you already know everything in the material we have aboard."

"You need to set your thoughts in order. You've spent most of our transit time acquiring the language."

"All right, then, let's run barefoot through the obvious." Laure paced a turn around the invisible deck. He felt its hardness, the vibration back through his sandals, he sensed the almost subliminal beat of driving energies, he caught a piny whiff of air as the ventilators shifted to another part of their odor-temperature-ionization cycle; but still the stars blazed about him, and their silence seemed to enter his bones. Abruptly, harshly, he said: "Turn that show off."

The ship obeyed. "Would you like a planetary scene?" she asked. "You haven't yet looked at those tapes from the elf castles on Jair that you bought—"

"Not now." Laure flung himself into a chair web and regarded the prosaic metal, instruments, manual override controls that surrounded him. "This will do."

"Are you feeling well? Why not go in the diagnoser and let me check you out? We've time before we arrive."

The tone was anxious. Laure didn't believe that emotion was put on. He refrained from anthropomorphizing his computer, just as he did those nonhuman sophonts he encountered. At the same time, he didn't go along with the school of thought which claimed that human-sensibility terms were absolutely meaningless in such connections. An alien brain, or a cybernetic one like *Jaccavrie*'s, could think; it was aware; it had conation. Therefore it had analogies to his.

Quite a few Rangers were eremitic types, sane enough but basically schizoid. That was their way of standing the gaff. It was normal for them to think of their ships as elaborate tools. Daven Laure, who was young and outgoing, naturally thought of his as a friend.

"No, I'm all right," he said. "A bit nervous, nothing else. This could turn out to be the biggest thing I . . . you and I have tackled yet. Maybe one of the biggest anyone has, at least on this frontier. I'd've been glad to have an older man or two along." He shrugged. "None available. Our service should increase its personnel, even if it means raising dues. We're spread much too thin across—how many stars?"

"The last report in my files estimated ten million planets with a significant number of Commonalty members on them. As for how many more there may be with which these have reasonably regular contact—"

"Oh, for everything's sake, come off it!" Laure actually laughed, and wondered if the ship had planned things that way. But regardless, he could begin to talk of this as a problem rather than a mystery.

"Let me recapitulate," he said, "and you tell me if I'm misinterpreting matters. A ship comes to Serieve, allegedly from far away. It's like nothing anybody has ever seen, unless in historical works. (They haven't got the references on Serieve to check that out, so we're bringing some from HQ.) Hyperdrive, gravity control, electronics, yes, but everything crude, archaic, bare-bones. Fission instead of fusion power, for example . . . and human piloting!

"That is, the crew seem to be human. We have no record of their

anthropometric type, but they don't look as odd as people do after several generations on some planets I could name. And the linguistic computer, once they get the idea that it's there to decipher their language and start cooperating with it, says their speech appears to have remote affinities with a few that we know, like ancient Anglic. Preliminary semantic analysis suggests their abstractions and constructs aren't quite like ours, but do fall well inside the human psych range. All in all, then, you'd assume they're explorers from distant parts."

"Except for the primitive ship," *Jaccavrie* chimed in. "One wouldn't expect such technological backwardness in any group which had maintained any contact, however tenuous, with the general mass of the different human civilizations. Nor would such a slow, underequipped vessel pass through them without stopping, to fetch up in this border region."

"Right. So . . . if it isn't a fake . . . their gear bears out a part of their story. Kirkasant is an exceedingly old colony . . . yonder." Laure pointed toward unseen stars. "Well out in the Dragon's Head sector, where we're barely beginning to explore. Somehow, somebody got that far, and in the earliest days of interstellar travel. They settled down on a planet and lost the trick of making spaceships. Only lately have they regained it."

"And come back, looking for the companionship of their own kind." Laure had a brief, irrational vision of *Jaccavrie* nodding. Her tone was so thoughtful. She would be a big, calm, dark-haired woman, handsome in middle age though getting somewhat plump . . . "What the crew themselves have said, as communication got established, seems to bear out this idea. Beneath a great many confused mythological motifs, I also get the impression of an epic voyage, by a defeated people who ran as far as they could."

"But Kirkasant!" Laure protested. "The whole situation they describe. It's impossible."

"Might not that Vandange be mistaken? I mean, we know so little. The Kirkasanters keep talking about a weird home environment. Ours appears to have stunned and bewildered them. They simply groped on through space till they happened to find Serieve. Thus might their own theory, that somehow they blundered in from an altogether different continuum, might it not conceivably be right?"

"Hm-m-m. I guess you didn't see Vandange's accompanying letter. No, you haven't, it wouldn't've been plugged into your memory. Anyway, he claims his assistants examined that ship down to the bolt

heads. And they found nothing, no mechanism, no peculiarity, whose function and behavior weren't obvious. He really gets indignant. Says the notion of interspace-time transference is mathematically absurd. I don't have quite his faith in mathematics, myself, but I must admit he has one common-sense point. If a ship could somehow flip from one entire cosmos to another . . . why, in five thousand years of interstellar travel, haven't we gotten some record of it happening?"

"Perhaps the ships to which it occurs never come back."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps the whole argument is due to misunderstanding. We don't have any good grasp of the Kirkasanter language. Or maybe it's a hoax. That's Vandange's opinion. He claims there's no such region as they say they come from. Not anywhere. Neither astronomers nor explorers have ever found anything like a . . . a space like a shining fog, crowded with stars—"

"But why should these wayfarers tell a falsehood?" *Jaccavrie* sounded honestly puzzled.

"I don't know. Nobody does. That's why the Serievan government decided it'd better ask for a Ranger."

Laure jumped up and started pacing again. He was a tall young man, with the characteristic beardlessness, fair hair and complexion, slightly slanted blue eyes of the Fireland mountaineers on New Vixen. But since he had trained at Starborough, which is on Aladir not far from Irontower City, he affected a fashionably simple gray tunic and blue hose. The silver comet of his calling blazoned his left breast.

"I don't know," he repeated. There rose in him a consciousness of that immensity which crouched beyond this hull. "Maybe they are telling the sober truth. We don't dare not know."

When a few score million people have an entire habitable world to themselves, they do not often build high. That comes later, along with formal wilderness preservation, disapproval of fecundity, and inducements to emigrate. Pioneer towns tend to be low and rambling. (Or so it is in that civilization wherein the Commonalty operates. We know that other branches of humanity have their distinctive ways, and hear rumors of yet stranger ones. But so vast is the galaxy—these two or three spiral arms, a part of which our race has to date thinly occupied—so vast, that we cannot even keep track of our own culture, let alone anyone else's.)

Pelogard, however, was founded on an island off the Branzan mainland, above Serieve's arctic circle: which comes down to almost 56°. Futhermore, it was an industrial center. Hence most of its

buildings were tall and crowded. Laure, standing by the outer wall of Ozer Vandange's office and looking forth across the little city, asked why this location had been chosen.

"You don't know?" responded the physicist. His inflection was a touch too elaborately incredulous.

"I'm afraid not," Laure confessed. "Think how many systems my service has to cover, and how many individual places within each system. If we tried to remember each, we'd never be anywhere but under the neuroinductors."

Vandange, seated small and bald and prim behind a large desk, pursed his lips. "Yes, yes," he said. "Nevertheless, I should not think an *experienced* Ranger would dash off to a planet without temporarily mastering a few basic facts about it."

Laure flushed. An experienced Ranger would have put this conceited old dustbrain in his place. But he himself was too aware of youth and awkwardness. He managed to say quietly, "Sir, my ship has complete information. She needed only scan it and tell me no precautions were required here. You have a beautiful globe and I can understand why you're proud of it. But please understand that to me it has to be a way station. My job is with those people from Kirkasant, and I'm anxious to meet them."

"You shall, you shall," said Vandange, somewhat mollified. "I merely thought a conference with you would be advisable first. As for your question, we need a city here primarily because upwelling ocean currents make the arctic waters mineral-rich. Extractor plants pay off better than they would farther south."

Despite himself, Laure was interested. "You're getting your minerals from the sea already? At so early a stage of settlement?"

"This sun and its planets are poor in heavy metals. Most local systems are. Not surprising. We aren't far, here, from the northern verge of the spiral arm. Beyond is the halo—thin gas, little dust, ancient globular clusters very widely scattered. The interstellar medium from which stars form has not been greatly enriched by earlier generations."

Laure suppressed his resentment at being lectured like a child. Maybe it was just Vandage's habit. He cast another glance through the wall. The office was high in one of the buildings. He looked across soaring blocks of metal, concrete, glass, and plastic, interlinked with trafficways and freight cables, down to the waterfront. There bulked the extractor plants, warehouses, and skydocks. Cargo craft moved

ponderously in and out. Not many passenger vessels flitted between. Pelogard must be largely automated.

The season stood at late spring. The sun cast brightness across a gray ocean that a wind rumpled. Immense flocks of seabirds dipped and wheeled. Or were they birds? They had wings, anyhow, steely blue against a wan sky. Perhaps they cried or sang, into the wind skirl and wave rush; but Laure couldn't hear in this enclosed place.

"That's one reason I can't accept their yarn," Vandange declared.

"Eh?" Laure came out of his reverie with a start.

Vandange pressed a button to opaque the wall. "Sit down. Let's get to business."

Laure eased himself into a lounger opposite the desk. "Why am I conferring with you?" he counterattacked. "Whoever was principally working with the Kirkasanters had to be a semanticist. In short, Paeri Ferand. He consulted specialists on your univeristy faculty, in anthropology, history, and so forth. But I should think your own role as a physicist was marginal. Yet you're the one taking up my time. Why?"

"Oh, you can see Ferand and the others as much as you choose," Vandange said. "You won't get more from them than repetitions of what the Kirkasanters have already told. How could you? What else have they got to go on? If nothing else, an underpopulated world like ours can't maintain staffs of experts to ferret out the meaning of every datum, every inconsistency, every outright lie. I had hoped, when our government notified your sector headquarters, the Rangers would have sent a real team, instead of—" He curbed himself. "Of course, they have many other claims on their attention. They would not see at once how important this is."

"Well," Laure said in his annoyance, "if you're suspicious, if you think the strangers need further investigation, why bother with my office? It's just an overworked little outpost. Send them on to a heart world, like Sarnac, where the facilities and people really can be had."

"It was urged," Vandange said. "I, and a few others who felt as I do, fought the proposal bitterly. In the end, as a compromise, the government decided to dump the whole problem in the lap of the Rangers. Who turn out to be, in effect, you. Now I must persuade you to be properly cautious. Don't you see, if those . . . beings . . . have some hostile intent, the very worst move would be to send them on—let them spy out our civilization—let them, perhaps, commit

nuclear sabotage on a vital center, and then vanish back into space." His voice grew shrill. "That's why we've kept them here so long, on one excuse after the next, here on our home planet. We feel responsible to the rest of mankind!"

"But what—" Laure shook his head. He felt a sense of unreality. "Sir, the League, the troubles, the Empire, its fall, the Long Night . . . every such thing—behind us. In space and time alike. The people of the Commonalty don't get into wars."

"Are you quite certain?"

"What makes *you* so certain of any menace in—one antiquated ship. Crewed by a score of men and women. Who came here openly and peacefully. Who, by every report, have been struggling to get past the language and culture barriers and communicate with you in detail—what in cosmos' name makes you worry about them?"

"The fact that they are liars."

Vandange sat awhile, gnawing his thumb, before he opened a box, took out a cigar and puffed it into lighting. He didn't offer Laure one. That might be for fear of poisoning his visitor with whatever local weed he was smoking. Scattered around for many generations on widely differing planets, populations did develop some odd distributions of allergy and immunity. But Laure suspected plain rudeness.

"I thought my letter made it clear," Vandange said. "They insist they are from another continuum. One with impossible properties, including visibility from ours. Conveniently on the far side of the Dragon's Head, so that we don't see it here. Oh, yes," he added quickly, "I've heard the arguments. That the whole thing is a misunderstanding due to our not having an adequate command of their language. That they're really trying to say they came from—well, the commonest rationalization is a dense star cluster. But it won't work, you know. It won't work at all."

"Come, now. Come, now. You must have learned some astronomy as part of your training. You must know that some things simply do not occur in the galaxy."

"Uh—"

"They showed us what they alleged were lens-and-film photographs taken from, ah, inside their home universe." Vandange bore down heavily on the sarcasm. "You saw copies, didn't you? Well, now, where in the real universe do you find that kind of nebulosity—so thick and extensive that a ship can actually lose its bearings, wander around lost, using up its film among other supplies, until it

chances to emerge in clear space? For that matter, assuming there were such a region, how could anyone capable of building a hyperdrive be so stupid as to go beyond sight of his beacon stars?

"Uh . . . I thought of a cluster, heavily hazed, somewhat like the young clusters of the Pleiades type."

"So did many Serievans," Vandange snorted. "Please use your head. Not even Pleiadic clusters contain that much gas and dust. Besides, the verbal description of the Kirkasanters sounds like a globular cluster, insofar as it sounds like anything. But not much. The ancient red suns are there, crowded together, true. But they speak of far too many younger ones.

"And of far too much heavy metal at home. Which their ship demonstrates. Their use of alloying elements like aluminum and beryllium is incredibly parsimonious. On the other hand, electrical conductors are gold and silver, the power plant is shielded not with lead but with inertcoated osmium, and it burns plutonium which the Kirkasanters assert was mined!

"They were astonished that Serieve is such a light-metal planet. Or claimed they were astonished. I don't know about that. I do know that this whole region is dominated by light elements. That its interstellar spaces are relatively free of dust and gas, the Dragon's Head being the only exception and it merely in transit through our skies. That all this is even more true of the globular clusters, which formed in an ultratenuous medium, mostly before the galaxy had condensed to its present shape—which, in fact, practically don't *occur* in the main body of the galaxy, but are off in the surrounding halo!"

Vandange stopped for breath and triumph.

"Well." Laure shifted uneasily in his seat and wished *Jaccavrie* weren't ten thousand kilometers away at the only spaceport. "You have a point. There are contradictions, aren't there? I'll bear what you said in mind when I, uh, interview the strangers themselves."

"And you will, I trust, be wary of them," Vandange said.

"Oh, yes. Something queer does seem to be going on."

In outward appearance, the Kirkasanters were not startling. They didn't resemble any of the human breeds that had developed locally, but they varied less from the norm than some. The fifteen men and five women were tall, robust, broad in chest and shoulders, slim in waist. Their skins were dark coppery reddish, their hair blue-black and wavy; males had some beard and mustache which they wore neatly trimmed. Skulls were dolichocephalic, faces disharmonically

wide, noses straight and thin, lips full. The total effect was handsome. Their eyes were their most arresting feature, large, long-lashed, luminous in shades of gray, or green, or yellow.

Since they had refused—with an adamant politeness they well knew how to assume—to let cell samples be taken for chromosome analysis, Vandange had muttered to Laure about nonhumans in surgical disguise. But that the Ranger classed as the fantasy of a provincial who'd doubtless never met a live xeno. You couldn't fake so many details, not and keep a viable organism. Unless, to be sure, happenstance had duplicated most of those details for you in the course of evolution . . .

Ridiculous, Laure thought. *Coincidence isn't that energetic.*

He walked from Pelogard with Demring Lodden, captain of the *Makt*, and Demring's daughter, navigator Graydal. The town was soon behind them. They found a trail that wound up into steeply rising hills, among low, gnarly trees which had begun to put forth leaves that were fronded and colored like old silver. The sun was sinking, the air noisy and full of salt odors. Neither Kirkasanter appeared to mind the chill.

"You know your way here well," Laure said clumsily.

"We should," Demring answered, "for we have been held on this sole island, with naught to do but ramble it when the *reyad* takes us."

"*Reyad?*" Laure asked.

"The need to . . . search," Graydal said. "To track beasts, or find what is new, or be alone in wild places. Our folk were hunters until not so long ago. We bear their blood."

Demring wasn't to be diverted from his grudge. "Why are we thus confined?" he growled. "Each time we sought an answer, we got an evasion. Fear of disease, need for us to learn what to expect—Ha, by now I'm half minded to draw my gun, force my way to our ship, and depart for aye!"

He was erect, grizzled, deeply graven of countenance and bleak of gaze. Like his men, he wore soft boots, a knee-length gown of some fine-scaled leather, a cowled cloak, a dagger and an energy pistol at his belt. On his forehead sparkled a diamond that betokened authority.

"Well, but, Master," Graydal said, "here today we deal with no village witchfinders. Daven Laure is a king's man, with power to act, knowledge and courage to act rightly. Has he not gone off alone with us because you said you felt stifled and spied on in the town? Let us talk as freefolk with him."

Her smile, her words in the husky voice that Laure remembered from his recordings, were gentle. He felt pretty sure, though, that as much steel underlay her as her father, and possibly whetted sharper. She almost matched his height, her gait was tigerish, she was herself weaponed and diademmed. Unlike Laure's close cut or Demring's short bob, her hair passed through a platinum ring and blew free at full length. Her clothes were little more than footgear, fringed shorts, and thin blouse. However attractive, the sight did not suggest seductive femininity to the Ranger—when she wasn't feeling the cold that struck through his garments. Besides, he had already learned that the sexes were mixed aboard the *Makt* for no other reason than that women were better at certain jobs than men. Every female was accompanied by an older male relative. The Kirkasanters were not an uncheerful folk, on the whole, but some of their ideals looked austere.

Nonetheless, Graydal had lovely strong features, and her eyes, under the level brows, shone amber.

Maybe the local government was over cautious," Laure said, "but don't forget, this is a frontier settlement. Not many light-years hence, in that part of the sky you came from, begins the unknown. It's true the stars are comparatively thin in these parts—average distance between them about four parsecs—but still, their number is too great for us to do more than feel our way slowly forward. Expecially when, in the nature of the case, planets like Serieve must devote most of their effort to developing themselves. So, when one is ignorant, one does best to be careful."

He flattered himself that was a well-composed conciliatory speech. It wasn't as oratorical as one of theirs, but they had lung capacity for a thinner atmosphere than this. He was disappointed when Demring said scornfully, "*Our* ancestors were not so timid."

"Or else their pursuers were not," Graydal laughed.

The captain looked offended. Laure hastily asked: "Have you no knowledge of what happened?"

"No," said the girl, turned pensive. "Not in truth. Legends, found in many forms across all Kirkasant, tell of battle, and a shipful of people who fled far until at last they found haven. A few fragmentary records—but those are vague, save the Baorn Codex; and it is little more than a compendium of technical information which the Wisemen of Skribent preserved. Even in that case"—she smiled again—"the meaning of most passages was generally obscure until after our modern scientists had invented the thing described for themselves."

"Do you know what records remain in Homeland?" Demring asked hopefully.

Laure sighed and shook his head. "No. Perhaps none, by now. Doubtless, in time, an expedition will go from us to Earth. But after five thousand trouble-filled years—And your ancestors may not have started from there. They may have belonged to one of the first colonies."

In a dim way, he could reconstruct the story. There had been a fight. The reasons—personal, familial, national, ideological, economic, whatever they were—had dropped into the bottom of the millennia between then and now. (A commentary on the importance of any such reasons.) But someone had so badly wanted the destruction of someone else that one ship, or one fleet, hounded another almost a quarter way around the galaxy.

Or maybe not, in a literal sense. It would have been hard to do. Crude as they were, those early vessels could have made the trip, if frequent stops were allowed for repair and resupply and refilling of the nuclear converters. But to this day, a craft under hyperdrive could only be detected within approximately a light-year's radius by the instantaneous "wake" of space-pulses. If she lay doggo for a while, she was usually unfindable in the sheer stupendousness of any somewhat larger volume. That the hunter should never, in the course of many months, either have overhauled his quarry or lost the scent altogether, seemed conceivable but implausible.

Maybe pursuit had not been for the whole distance. Maybe the refugees had indeed escaped after a while, but —in blind panic, or rage against the foe, or desire to practice undisturbed a brand of utopianism, or whatever the motive was—they had continued as far as they possibly could, and hidden themselves as thoroughly as nature allowed.

In any case, they had ended in a strange part of creation: so strange that numerous men on Serieve did not admit it existed. By then, their ship must have been badly in need of a complete overhaul, amounting virtually to a rebuilding. They settled down to construct the necessary industrial base. (Think, for example, how much plant you must have before you make your first transistor.) They did not have the accumulated experience of later generations to prove how impossible this was.

Of course they failed, A few score—a few hundred at absolute maximum, if the ship had been rigged with suspended-animation

lockers—could not preserve a fullfledged civilization while coping with a planet for which man was never meant. And they had to content themselves with that planet. Once into the Cloud Universe even if their vessel could still wheeze along for a while, they were no longer able to move freely about, picking and choosing.

Kirkasant was probably the best of a bad lot. And Laure thought it was rather a miracle that man had survived there. So small a genetic pool, so hostile an environment . . . but the latter might well have saved him from the effects of the former. Natural selection must have been harsh. And, seemingly, the radiation background was high, which led to a corresponding mutation rate. Women bore from puberty to menopause, and buried most of their babies. Men struggled to keep them alive. Often death harvested adults too, entire families. But those who were fit tended to survive. And the planet did have an unfilled ecological niche: the one reserved for intelligence. Evolution galloped. Population exploded. In one or two millennia, man was at home in Kirkasant. In five, he crowded it and went looking for new planets.

Because culture had never totally died. The first generation might be unable to build machine tools, but could mine and forge metals. The next generation might be too busy to keep public schools, but had enough hard practical respect for learning that it supported a literate class. Succeeding generations, wandering into new lands, founding new nations and societies, might war with each other, but all drew from a common tradition and looked to one goal: reunion with the stars.

Once the scientific method had been created afresh, Laure thought, progress must have been more rapid than on Earth. For the natural philosophers knew certain things were possible, even if they didn't know how, and this was half the battle. They must have got some hints, however oracular, from the remnants of ancient texts. They actually had the corroded hulk of the ancestral ship for their studying. Given this much, it was not too surprising that they leaped in a single lifetime from the first moon rockets to the first hyperdrive craft—and did so on a basis of wildly distorted physical theory, and embarked with such naïveté that they couldn't find their way home again!

All very logical. Unheard of, outrageously improbable, but in this big galaxy the strangest things are bound to happen now and again. The Kirkasanters could be absolutely honest in their story.

If they were.

"Let the past tend the past," Graydal said impatiently. "We've tomorrow to hunt in."

"Yes," Laure said, "but I do need to know a few things. It's not clear to me how you found us. I mean, you crossed a thousand light-years or more of wilderness. How did you come on a speck like Serieve?"

"We were asked that before," Demring said, "but then we could not well explain, few words being held in common. Now you show a good command of the Hobrokan tongue, and for our part, albeit none of these villagers will take the responsibility of putting one of us under your educator machine . . . in talking with technical folk we've gained various technical words of yours."

He was silent awhile, collecting phrases. The three people continued up the trail. It was wide enough for them to walk abreast, somewhat muddy with rain and melted snow. The sun was so far down that the woods walled it off; twilight smoked from the ground and from either side, though the sky was still pale. The wind was dying but the chill deepening. Somewhere behind those dun trunks and ashy-metallic leaves, a voice went "K-kr-r-r-*ruk!*" and, above and ahead, the sound of a river became audible.

Demring said with care: "See you, when we could not find our way back to Kirkasant's sun, and at last had come out in an altogether different cosmos, we thought our ancestors might have originated there. Certain traditional songs hinted as much, speaking of space as dark, for instance; and surely darkness encompassed us now, and immense loneliness between the stars. Well, but in which direction might Homeland lie? Casting about with telescopes, we spied afar a black cloud, and thought, if the ancestors had been in flight from enemies, they might well have gone through such, hoping to break their trail."

"The Dragon's Head Nebula," Laure nodded.

Graydal's wide shoulders lifted and fell. "At least it gave us something to steer by," she said.

Laure stole a moment's admiration of her profile. "You had courage," he said. "Quite aside from everything else, how did you know this civilization had not stayed hostile to you?"

"How did we know it ever was in the first place?" she chuckled. "Myself, insofar as I believe the myths have any truth, I suspect our ancestors were thieves or bandits, or—"

"Daughter!" Demring hurried on, in a scandalized voice: "When we had fared thus far, we found the darkness was dust and gas such as pervade the universe at home. There was simply an absence of stars

to make it shine. Emerging on the far side, we tuned our neutrino detectors. Our reasoning was that a highly developed civilization would use a great many nuclear power plants. Their neutrino flux should be detectable above the natural noise level—in this comparatively empty cosmos—across several score light-years or better, and we could home on it."

First they sound like barbarian bards, Laure thought, *and then like radionicians. No wonder a dogmatist like Vandange can't put credence in them.*

Can I?

"We soon began to despair," Graydal said. "We were nigh to the limit—"

"No matter," Demring interrupted.

She looked steadily first at one man, then the other, and said, "I dare trust Daven Laure." To the Ranger: "Belike no secret anyhow, since men on Serieve must have examined our ship with knowledgeable eyes. We were nigh to our limit of travel without refueling and refurbishing. We were about to seek for a planet not too unlike Kirkasant where—But then, as if by Valfar's Wings, came the traces we sought, and we followed them here.

"And here were humans!

"Only of late has our gladness faded as we begin to see how they temporize and keep us half prisoner. Wholly prisoner, maybe, should we try to depart. Why will they not rely on us?"

"I tried to explain that when we talked yesterday," Laure said. "Some important men don't see how you could be telling the truth."

She caught his hand in a brief, impulsive grasp. Her own was warm, slender, and hard. "But you are different?"

"Yes." He felt helpless and alone. "They've, well, they've called for me. Put the entire problem in the hands of my organization. And my fellows have so much else to do that, well, I'm given broad discretion."

Demring regarded him shrewdly. "You are a young man," he said. "Do not let your powers paralyze you."

"No. I will do what I can for you. It may be little."

The trail rounded a thicket and they saw a rustic bridge across the river, which ran seaward in foam and clangor. Halfway over, the party stopped, leaned on the rail and looked down. The water was thickly shadowed between its banks, and the woods were becoming a solid black mass athwart a dusking sky. The air smelled wet.

"You realize," Laure said, "it won't be easy to retrace your route. You improvised your navigational coordinates. They can be transformed into ours on this side of the Dragon's Head, I suppose. But once beyond the nebula, I'll be off my own charts, except for what few listed objects are visible from either side. No one from this civilization has been there, you see, what with millions of suns closer to our settlements. And the star sights you took can't have been too accurate."

"You are not going to take us to Homeland, then," Demring said tonelessly.

"Don't you understand? Homeland, Earth, it's so far away that I myself don't know what it's like anymore!"

"But you must have a nearby capital, a more developed world than this. Why do you not guide us thither, that we may talk with folk wiser than these wretched Serievans?"

"Well . . . uh . . . Oh, many reasons. I'll be honest, caution is one of them. Also, the Commonalty does not have anything like a capital, or— But yes, I could guide you to the heart of civilization. Any of numerous civilizations in the galactic arm." Laure took a breath and slogged on. "My decision, though, under the circumstances, is that first I'd better see your world Kirkasant. After that . . . well, certainly, if everything is all right, we'll establish regular contacts, and invite your people to visit ours, and— Don't you like the plan? Don't you want to go home?"

"How shall we, ever?" Graydal asked low.

Laure cast her a surprised glance. She stared ahead of her and down, into the river. A fish—some kind of swimming creature—leaped. Its scales caught what light remained in a gleam that was faint but startling against those murky waters. She didn't seem to notice, though she cocked her head instinctively toward the splash that followed.

"Have you not listened?" she said. "Did you not hear us? How long we searched in the fog, through that forest of suns, until at last we left our whole small bright universe and came into this great one that has so much blackness in it—and thrice we plunged back into our own space, and groped about, and came forth without having found trace of any star we knew—" Her voice lifted the least bit. "We are lost, I tell you, eternally lost. Take us to your home, Daven Laure, that we may try to make ours there."

He wanted to stroke her hands, which had clenched into fists on the bridge rail. But he made himself say only: "Our science and

resources are more than yours. Maybe we can find a way where you cannot. At any rate, I'm duty bound to learn as much as I can, before I make report and recommendation to my superiors."

"I do not think you are kind, forcing my crew to return and look again on what has gone from them," Demring said stiffly. "But I have scant choice save to agree." He straightened. "Come, best we start back toward Pelogard. Night will soon be upon us."

"Oh, no rush," Laure said, anxious to change the subject. "An arctic zone, at this time of year— We'll have no trouble."

"Maybe you will not," Graydal said. "But Kirkasant after sunset is not like here."

They were on their way down when dusk became night, a light night where only a few stars gleamed and Laure walked easily through a clear gloaming. Gradal and Demring must needs use their energy guns at minimum intensity for flashcasters. And even so, they often stumbled.

Makt was three times the size of *Jaccavrie*, a gleaming torpedo shape whose curve was broken by boat housings and weapon turrets. The Ranger vessel looked like a gig attending her. In actuality, *Jaccavrie* could have outrun, outmaneuvered, or outfought the Kirkasanter with ludicrous ease. Laure didn't emphasize that fact. His charges were touchy enough already. He had suggested hiring a modern carrier for them, and met a glacial negative. This craft was the property and bore the honor of the confederated clans that had built her. She was not to be abandoned.

Modernizing her would have taken more time than increased speed would save. Besides, while Laure was personally convinced of the good intentions of Demring's people, he had no right to present them with up-to-date technology until he had proof they wouldn't misuse it.

One could not accurately say that he resigned himself to accompanying them in his ship at the plodding pace of theirs. The weeks of travel gave him a chance to get acquainted with them and their culture. And that was not only his duty but his pleasure. Especially, he found, when Graydal was involved.

Some time passed before he could invite her to dinner *á deux*. He arranged it with what he felt sure was adroitness. Two persons, undisturbed, talking socially, could exchange information of the subtle kind that didn't come across in committee. Thus he proposed a series of private meetings with the officers of *Makt*. He began with

the captain, naturally; but after a while came the navigator's turn.

Jaccarrie phased in with the other vessel, laid alongside and made air-lock connections in a motion too smooth to feel. Graydal came aboard and the ships parted company again. Laure greeted her according to the way of Kirkasant, with a handshake. The clasp lasted a moment. "Welcome," he said.

"Peace between us." Her smile offset her formalism. She was in uniform—another obsolete aspect of her society—but it shimmered gold and molded itself to her.

"Won't you come to the saloon for a drink before we eat?"

"I shouldn't. Not in space."

"No hazard," said the computer in an amused tone. "I operate everything anyway."

Graydal had tensed and clapped hand to gun at the voice. She relaxed and tried to laugh. "I'm sorry. I am not used to . . . you." She almost bounded on her way down the corridor with Laure. He had set the interior weight at one standard G. The Kirkasanters maintained theirs fourteen percent higher, to match the pull of their home world.

Though she had inspected this ship several time already, Graydal looked wide-eyed around her. The saloon was small but sybaritic. "You do yourself proud," she said amidst the draperies, music, perfumes, and animations.

He guided her to a couch. "You don't sound quite approving," he said.

"Well—"

"There's no virtue in suffering hardships."

"But there is the ability to endure them." She sat too straight for the form-fitter cells to make her comfortable.

"Think I can't?"

Embarrassed, she turned her gaze from him, toward the view-screen, on which flowed a color composition. Her lips tightened. "Why have you turned off the exterior scene?"

"You don't seem to like it, I've noticed." He sat down beside her. "What will you have? We're fairly well stocked."

"Turn it on."

"What?"

"The outside view." Her notrils dilated. "It shall not best me."

He spread his hands. The ship saw his rueful gesture and obliged. Space leaped into the screen, star-strewn except where the storm-cloud mass of the dark nebula reared ahead. He heard Graydal suck in

a breath and said quickly, "Uh, since you aren't familiar with our beverages, I suggest daiquiris. They're tart, a little sweet—"

Her nod was jerky. Her eyes seemed locked to the screen. He leaned close, catching the slight warm odor of her, not quite identical with the odor of other women he had known, though the difference was too subtle for him to name. "Why does that sight bother you?" he asked.

"The strangeness. The aloneness. It is so absolutely alien to home. I feel forsaken and—" She filled her lungs, forced detachment on herself, and said in an analytical manner: "Possibly we are disturbed by a black sky because we have virtually none of what you call night vision." A touch of trouble returned. "What esle have we lost?"

"Night vision isn't needed on Kirkasant, you tell me," Laure consoled her. "And evolution there worked fast. But you must have gained as well as atrophied. I know you have more physical strength, for instance, than your ancestors could've had." A tray with two glasses extended from the side. "Ah, here are the drinks."

She sniffed at hers. "It smells pleasant," she said. "But are you sure there isn't something I might be allergic to?"

"I doubt that. You didn't react to anything we tried on Serieve, did you?"

"No, except for finding it overly bland."

"Don't worry," he grinned. "Before we left, your father took care to present me with one of your saltshakers. It'll be on the dinner table."

Jaccavrie had analyzed the contents. Besides sodium and potassium chloride—noticeably less abundant on Kirkasant than on the average planet, but not scarce enough to cause real trouble—the mixture included a number of other salts. The proportion of rare earths and especially arsenic was surprising. An ordinary human who ingested the latter element at that rate would lose quite a few years of life expectancy. Doubtless the first refugee generations had, too, when something else didn't get them first. But by now their descendants were so well adapted that food didn't taste right without a bit of arsenic trioxide.

"We wouldn't have to be cautious—we'd know in advance what you can and cannot take—if you'd permit a chromosome analysis," Laure hinted. "The laboratory aboard this ship can do it."

Her cheeks turned more than ever coppery. She scowled. "We refused before," she said.

"May I ask why?"

"It . . . violates integrity. Humans are not to be probed into."

He had encountered that attitude before, in several guises. To the Kirkasanter—at least, to the Hobrokan clansman; the planet had other cultures—the body was a citadel for the ego, which by right should be inviolable. The feeling, so basic that few were aware of having it, had led to the formation of reserved, often rather cold personalities. It had handicapped if not stopped the progress of medicine. On the plus side, it had made for dignity and self-reliance; and it had caused this civilization to be spared professional gossips, confessional literature, and psycho-analysis.

"I don't agree," Laure said. "Nothing more is involved than scientific information. What's personal about a DNA map?"

"Well . . . maybe. I shall think on the matter." Graydal made an obvious effort to get away from the topic. She sipped her drink, smiled, and said, "Mm-m-m. this *is* a noble flavor."

"Hoped you'd like it. I do. We have a custom in the Commonalty—" He touched glasses with her.

"Charming. Now we, when good friends are together, drink half what's in our cups and then exchange them."

"May I?"

She blushed again, but with pleasure. "Certainly. You honor me."

"No, the honor is mine." Laure went on, quite sincere: "What your people have done is tremendous. What an addition to the race you'll be!"

Her mouth drooped. "If ever my folk may be found."

"Surely—"

"Do you think we did not try?" She tossed off another gulp of her cocktail. Evidently it went fast to her unaccustomed head. "We did not fare forth blindly. Understand that *Makt* is not the first ship to leave Kirkasant's sun. But the prior ones went to nearby stars, stars that can be seen from home. They are many. We have not realized how many more are in the Cloud Universe, hidden from eyes and instruments, a few light-years farther on. We, our ship, we intended to take the next step. Only the next step. Barely beyond that shell of suns we could see from Kirkasant's system. We could find our way home again without trouble. Of course we could! We need but steer by those suns that were already charted on the edge of instrumental perception. Once we were in their neighborhood, our familiar part of space would be visible."

She faced him, gripping his arm painfully hard, speaking in a

desperate voice. "What we had not known, what no one had known, was the imprecision of that charting. The absolute magnitudes, therefore the distances and relative positions of those verge-visible stars . . . had not been determined as well as the astronomers believed. Too much haze, too much shine, too much variability. Do you understand? And so, suddenly, our tables were worthless. We though we could identify some suns. But we were wrong. Flitting toward them, we must have bypassed the volume of space we sought . . . and gone on and on, more hopelessly lost each day, each endless day—

"What makes you think you can find our home?"

Laure, who had heard the details before, had spent the time admiring her and weighing his reply. He sipped his own drink, letting the sourness glide over his palate and the alcohol slightly, soothingly burn him, before he said: "I can try. I do have instruments your people have not yet invented. Inertial devices, for example, that work under hyperdrive as well as at true velocity. Don't give up hope." He paused. "I grant you, we might fail. Then what will you do?"

The blunt question, which would have driven many women of his world to tears, made her rally. She lifted her head and said—haughtiness rang through the words: "Why, we will make the best of things, and I do not think we will do badly."

Well, he thought, *she's descended from nothing but survivor types. Her nature is to face trouble and whip it.*

I'm sure you will succeed magnificently," he said. "You'll need time to grow used to our ways, and you may never feel quite easy in them, but—"

"What are your marriages like?" she asked.

"Uh?" Laure fitted his jaw back into place.

She was not drunk, he decided. A bit of drink, together with these surroundings, the lilting music, odors and pheromones in the air, had simply lowered her inhibitions. The huntress in her was set free, and at once attacked whatever had been most deeply perturbing her. The basic reticence remained. She looked straight at him, but she was fiery-faced, as she said:

"We ought to have had an equal number of men and women along on *Makt*. Had we known what was to happen, we would have done so. But now ten men shall have to find wives among foreigners. Do you think they will have much difficulty?"

"Uh, why no. I shouldn't think they will," he floundered. "They're obviously superior types, and then, being exotic—glamorous . . ."

"I speak not of amatory pleasure. But . . . what I overheard on Serieve, a time or two . . . did I miscomprehend? Are there truly women among you who do not bear children?"

"On the older planets, yes, that's not uncommon. Population control—"

"We shall have to stay on Serieve, then, or worlds like it." She sighed. "I had hoped we might go to the pivot of your civilization, where your real work is done and our children might become great."

Laure considered her. After a moment, he understood. Adapting to the uncountably many aliennesses of Kirkasant had been a long and cruel process. No blood line survived which did not do more than make-up its own heavy losses. The will to reproduce was a requirement of existence. It, too, became an instinct.

He remembered that, while Kirkasant was not a very fertile planet, and today its population strained its resources, no one had considered reducing the birthrate. When someone on Serieve had asked why, Demring's folk had reacted strongly. The idea struck them as obscene. They didn't care for the notion of genetic modification or exogenetic growth either. And yet they were quite reasonable and noncompulsive about most other aspects of their culture.

Culture, Laure thought. *Yes. That's mutable. But you don't change your instincts; they're built into your chromosomes. Her people must have children.*

"Well," he said, "you can find women who want large families on the central planets, too. If anything, they'll be eager to marry your friends. They have a problem finding men who feel as they do, you see."

Graydal dazzled him with a smile and held out her glass. "Exchange?" she proposed.

"Hoy, you're way ahead of me." He evened the liquid levels. "Now."

They looked at each other throughout the little ceremony. He nerved himself to ask, "As for you women, do you necessarily have to marry within your ship?"

"No," she said. "It would depend on . . . whether any of your folk . . . might come to care for one of us."

"That I can guarantee!"

"I would like a man who travels," she murmured, "if I and the children could come along."

"Quite easy to arrange," Laure said.

She said in haste: "But we are buying grief, are we not? You told me perhaps you can find our planet for us."

"Yes. I hope, though, if we succeed, that won't be the last I see of you."

"Truly it won't."

They finished their drinks and went to dinner. *Jaccavrie* was also an excellent cook. And the choice of wines was considerable. What was said and laughed at over the table had no relevance to anyone but Laure and Graydal.

Except that, at the end, with immense and tender seriousness, she said: "If you want a cell sample from me . . . for analysis . . . you may have it."

He reached across the table and took her hand. "I wouldn't want you to do anything you might regret later," he said.

She shook her head. The tawny eyes never left him. Her voice was slow, faintly slurred, but bespoke complete awareness of what she was saying. "I have come to know you. For you to do this thing will be no violation."

Laure explained eagerly: "The process is simple and painless, as far as you're concerned. We can go right down to the lab. The computer operates everything. It'll give you an anesthetic spray and remove a small sample of flesh, so small that tomorrow you won't be sure where the spot was. Of course, the analysis will take a long while. We don't have all possible equipment aboard. And the computer does have to devote most of her—most of its attention to piloting and interior work. But at the end, we'll be able to tell you—"

"Hush." Her smile was sleepy. "No matter. If you wish this, that's enough. I ask only one thing."

"What?"

"Do not let a machine use the knife, or the needle, or whatever it is. I want you to do that yourself."

". . . Yes. Yonder is our home sky." The physicist Hirn Oran's son spoke slow and hushed. Cosmic interference seethed across his radio voice, nigh drowning it in Laure's and Graydal's earplugs.

"No," the Ranger said. "Not off there. We're already in it."

"What?" Silvery against rock, the two space-armored figures turned to stare at him. He could not see their expressions behind the faceplates, but he could imagine how astonishment flickered above awe.

He paused, arranging words in his mind. The star noise in his receivers was like surf and fire. The landscape overwhelmed him.

Here was no simple airless planet. No planet is ever really simple, and this one had a stranger history than most. Eons ago it was apparently a subjovian, with a cloudy hydrohelium and methane atmosphere and an immense shell of ice and frozen gases around the core; for it orbited its sun at a distance of almost a billion and a half kilometers, and though that primary was bright, at this remove it could be little more than a spark.

Until stellar evolution—hastened, Laure believed, by an abnormal infall of cosmic material—took the star off the main sequence. It swelled, surface cooling to red but total output growing so monstrous that the inner planets were consumed. On the farther ones, like this, atmosphere fled into space. Ice melted; the world-ocean boiled; each time the pulsations of the sun reached a maximum, more vapor escaped. Now nothing remained except a ball of metal and rock, hardly larger than a terrestrial-type globe. As the pressure of the top layers was removed, frightful tectonic forces must have been liberated. Mountains—the younger ones with crags like sharp teeth, the older ones worn by meteorite and thermal erosion—rose from a cratered plain of gloomy stone. Currently at a minimum, but nonetheless immense, a full seven degrees across, blue core surrounded and dimmed by the tenuous ruddy atmosphere, the sun smoldered aloft.

Its furnace light was not the sole illumination. Another star was passing sufficiently near at the time that it showed a perceptible disk . . . in a stopped-down viewscreen, because no human eye could directly confront that electric cerulean intensity. The outsider was a B_8, newborn out of dust and gas, blazing with an intrinsic radiance of a hundred Sols.

Neither one helped in the shadows cast by the pinnacled upthrust which Laure's party was investigating. Flashcasters were necessary.

But more was to see overhead, astride the dark. Stars in thousands powdered the sky, brilliant with proximity. And they were the mere fringes of the cluster. It was rising as the planet turned, partly backgrounding and partly following the sun. Laure had never met a sight to compare. For the most part, the individuals he could pick out in that enormous spheroidal cloud of light were themselves red: long-lived dwarfs, dying giants like the one that brooded over him. But many glistened exuberant golden, emerald, sapphire. Some could not be older than the blue which wandered past and added its

own harsh hue to this land. All those stars were studded through a soft glow that pervaded the entire cluster, a nacreous luminosity into which they faded and vanished, the fog wherein his companions had lost their home but which was a shining beauty to behold.

"You live in a wonder," Laure said.

Graydal moved toward him. She had had no logical reason to come down out of *Makt's* orbit with him and Hirn. The idea was simply to break out certain large groundbased instruments that *Jaccavrie* carried, for study of their goal before traveling on. Any third party could assist. But she had laid her claim first, and none of her shipmates argued. They knew how often she and Laure were in each other's company.

"Wait until you reach our world," she said low. "Space is eldritch and dangerous. But once on Kirkasant—We will watch the sun go down in the Rainbow Desert; suddenly, in that thin air, night has come, our shimmering star-crowded night, and the auroras dance and whisper above the stark hills. We will see great flying flocks rise from dawn mists over the salt marshes, hear their wings thunder and their voices flute. We will stand on the battlements of Ey, under the banners of those very knights who long ago rid the land of the firegarms, and watch the folk dance welcome to a new year—"

"If the navigator pleases," said Hirn, his voice sharpened by an unadmitted dauntedness, "we will save our dreams for later and attend now to the means of realizing them. At present, we are supposed to choose a good level site for the observing apparatus. But, ah, Ranger Laure, may I ask what you meant by saying we are already back in the Cloud Universe?"

Laure was not as annoyed to have Graydal interrupted as he might normally have been. She'd spoken of Kirkasant so often that he felt he had almost been there himself. Doubtless it had its glories, but by his standards it was a grim, dry, storm-scoured planet where he would not care to stay for long at a time. Of course, to her it was beloved home; and he wouldn't mind making occasional visits if—No, chaos take it, there was work on hand!

Part of his job was to make explanations. He said: "In your sense of the term, Physicist Hirn, the Cloud Universe does not exist."

The reply was curt through the static. "I disputed that point on Serieve already, with Vandange and others. And I resented their implication that we of *Makt* were either liars or incompetent observers."

"You're neither," Laure said quickly. "But communication had a double barrier on Serieve. First, an imperfect command of your language. Only on the way here, spending most of my time in contact with your crew, have I myself begun to feel a real mastery of Hobrokan. The second barrier, though, was in some ways more serious: Vandange's stubborn preconceptions, and your own."

"I was willing to be convinced."

"But you never got a convincing argument. Vandange was so dogmatically certain that what you reported having seen was impossible, that he didn't take a serious look at your report to see if it might have an orthodox explanation after all. You naturally got angry at this and cut the discussions off short. For your part, you had what you had always been taught was a perfectly good theory, which your experiences had confirmed. You weren't going to change your whole concept of physics just because the unlovable Ozer Vandange scoffed at it."

"But we were mistaken," Graydal said. "You've intimated as much, Daven, but never made your meaning clear."

"I wanted to see the actual phenomenon for myself, first," Laure said. "We have a proverb—so old that it's reputed to have originated on Earth—'It is a capital mistake to theorize in advance of the data.' But I couldn't help speculating, and what I see shows my speculations were along the right lines."

"Well?" Hirn challenged.

"Let's start with looking at the situation from your viewpoint," Laure suggested. "Your people spent millennia on Kirkasant. You lost every hint, except a few ambiguous traditions, that things might be different elsewhere. To you, it was natural that the night sky should be like a gently shining mist, and stars should crowd thickly around. When you developed the scientific method again, not many generations back, perforce you studied the universe you knew. Ordinary physics and chemistry, even atomistics and quantum theory, gave you no special problems. But you measured the distances of the visible stars as light-months—at most, a few light-years—after which they vanished in the foggy background. You measured the concentration of that fog, that dust and fluorescing gas. And you had no reason to suppose the interstellar medium was not equally dense everywhere. Nor had you any hint of receding galaxies.

"So your version of relativity made space sharply curved by the mass packed together throughout it. The entire universe was two or three hundred light-years across. Stars condensed and evolved—you

could witness every stage of that—but in a chaotic fashion, with no particular overall structure. It's a wonder to me that you went on to gravities and hyperdrive. I wish I were scientist enough to appreciate how different some of the laws and constants must be in your physics. But you did plow ahead. I guess the fact you knew these things were possible was important to your success. Your scientists would keep fudging and finagling, in defiance of theoretical niceties, until they made something work."

"Um-m-m . . . as a matter of fact, yes," Hirn said in a slightly abashed tone. Graydal snickered.

"Well, then *Makt* lost her way, and emerged into the outer universe, which was totally strange," Laure said. "You had to account somehow for what you saw. Like any scientists, you stayed with accepted ideas as long as feasible—a perfectly correct principle which my people call the razor of Occam. I imagine that the notion of contiguous space-times with varying properties looks quite logical if you're used to thinking of a universe with an extremely small radius. You may have been puzzled as to how you managed to get out of one 'bubble' and into the next, but I daresay you cobbled together a tentative explanation."

"I did," Hirn said. "If we postulate a multidimensional—"

"Never mind," Laure said. "That's no longer needful. We can account for the facts much more simply."

"How? I have been pondering it. I think I can grasp the idea of a universe billions of light-years across, in which the stars form galaxies. But our home space—"

"Is a dense star cluster. And as such, it has no definite boundaries. That's what I meant by saying we are already in it. In the thin verge, at least." Laure pointed to the diffuse, jeweled magnificence that was rising higher above these wastes, in the wake of the red and blue suns. "Yonder's the main body, and Kirkasant is somewhere there. But this system here is associated. I've checked proper motions and I know."

"I could have accepted some such picture while on Serieve," Hirn said. "But Vandange was so insistent that a star cluster like this cannot be." Laure visualized the sneer behind his faceplate. "I thought that he, belonging to the master civilization, would know whereof he spoke."

"He does. He's merely rather unimaginative," Laure said. "You see, what we have here is a globular cluster. That's a group made up of stars close together in a roughly spherical volume of space. I'd guess

you have a quarter million, packed into a couple of hundred light-year's diameter.

"But globular clusters haven't been known like this one. The ones we do know lie mostly well off the galactic plane. The space within them is much clearer than in the spiral arms, almost a perfect vacuum. The individual members are red. Any normal stars of greater than minimal mass have gone off the main sequence long ago. The survivors are metal-poor. That's another sign of extreme age. Heavy elements are formed in stellar cores, you know, and spewed back into space. So it's the younger suns, coalescing out of the enriched interstellar medium, that contain a lot of metal. All in all, everything points to the globular clusters being relics of an embryo stage in the galaxy's life.

"Yours, however—! Dust and gas so thick that not even a giant can be seen across many parsecs. Plenty of mainsequence stars, including blues which cannot be more than a few million years old, they burn out so fast. Spectra, not to mention planets your explorers visited, showing atomic abundances far skewed toward the high end of the periodic table. A background radiation too powerful for a man like me to dare take up permanent residence in your country.

"Such a cluster shouldn't be!"

"But is is," Graydal said.

Laure made bold to squeeze her hand, though little of that could pass through the gauntlets. "I'm glad," he answered.

"How do you explain the phenomenon?" Hirn asked.

"Oh, that's obvious . . . now that I've seen the things and gathered some information on its path," Laure said. "An improbable situation, maybe unique, but not impossible. This cluster happens to have an extremely eccentric orbit around the galactic center of mass. Once or twice a gigayear, it passes throug the vast thick clouds that surround that region. By gravitation, it sweeps up immense quantities of stuff. Meanwhile, I suppose, perturbation causes some of its senior members to drift off. You might say it's periodically rejuvenated.

"At present, it's on its way out again. Hasn't quite left our spiral arm. It passed near the galactic midpoint just a short while back, cosmically speaking; I'd estimate less than fifty million years. The infall is still turbulent, still condensing out into new stars like that blue giant shining on us. Your home sun and its planets must be a product of an earlier sweep. But there've been twenty or thirty such since the galaxy formed, and each one of them was responsible for

several generations of giant stars. So Kirkasant has a lot more heavy elements than the normal planet, even though it's not much younger than Earth. Do you follow me?"

"Hm-m-m . . . perhaps. I shall have to think." Hirn walked off, across the great tilted block on which the party stood, to its edge, where he stopped and looked down into the shadows below. They were deep and knife sharp. The mingled light of red and blue suns, stars, starfog played eerie across the stone land. Laure grew aware of what strangeness and what silence—under the hiss in his ears—pressed in on him.

Graydal must have felt the same, for she edged close until their armors clinked together. He would have liked to see her face. She said: "Do you truly believe we can enter that realm and conquer it?"

"I don't know," he said, slow and blunt. "The sheer number of stars may beat us."

"A large enough fleet could search them, one by one."

"If it could navigate. We have yet to find out whether that's possible."

"Suppose. Did you guess a quarter million suns in the cluster? Not all are like ours. Not even a majority. On the other coin side, with visibility as low as it is, space must be searched back and forth, light-year by light-year. We of *Makt* could die of eld before a single vessel chanced on Kirkasant."

"I'm afraid that's true."

"Yet an adequate number of ships, dividing the task, could find our home in a year or two."

"That would be unattainably expensive, Graydal."

He thought he sensed her stiffening. "I've come on this before," she said coldly, withdrawing from his touch. "In your Commonalty they count the cost and the profit first. Honor, adventure, simple charity must run a poor second."

"Be reasonable," he said. "Cost represents labor, skill, and resources. The gigantic fleet that would go looking for Kirkasant must be diverted from other jobs. Other people would suffer need as a result. Some might suffer sharply."

"Do you mean a civilization as big, as productive as yours could not spare that much effort for a while without risking disaster?"

She's quick on the uptake, Laure thought. *Knowing what machine technology can do on her single impoverished world, she can well guess what it's capable of with millions of planets to draw on. But how can I make her realize that matters aren't that simple?*

"Please, Graydal," he said. "Won't you believe I'm working for you? I've come this far, and I'll go as much farther as need be, if something doesn't kill us."

He heard her gulp. "Yes. I offer apology. *You* are different."

"Not really. I'm a typical Commonalty member. Later, maybe, I can show you how our civilization works, and what an odd problem in political economy we've got if Kirkasant is to be rediscovered. But first we have to establish that locating it is physically possible. We have to make long-term observations from here, and then enter those mists, and—One trouble at a time, I beg you!"

She laughed gently. "Indeed, my friend. And you will find a way." The mirth faded. It had never been strong. "Won't you?" The reflection of clouded stars glistened on her faceplate like tears.

Blindness was not dark. It shone.

Standing on the bridge, amidst the view of space, Laure saw nimbus and thunderheads. They piled in cliffs, they eddied and streamed, their color was a sheen of all colors overlying white—mother-of-pearl—but here and there they darkened with shadows and grottoes; here and there they glowed dull red as they reflected a nearby sun. For the stars were scattered about in their myriads, dominantly ruby and ember, some yellow or candent, green or blue. The nearest were clear to the eye, a few showing tiny disks, but the majority were fuzzy glows rather than lightpoints. Such shimmers grew dim with distance until the mist engulfed them entirely and nothing remained but mist.

A crackling noise beat out of that roiling formlessness, like flames. Energies pulsed through his marrow. He remembered the old, old myth of the Yawning Gap, where fire and ice arose and out of them the Nine Worlds, which were doomed in the end to return to fire and ice; and he shivered.

"Illusion," said *Jaccavrie's* voice out of immensity.

"What?" Laure started. It was as if a mother goddess had spoken.

She chuckled. Whether deity or machine, she had the great strength of ordinariness in her. "You're rather transparent to an observer who knows you well," she said. "I could practically read your mind."

Laure swallowed. "The sight, well, a big, marvelous, dangerous thing, maybe unique in the galaxy. Yes, I admit I'm impressed."

"We have much to learn here."

"Have you been doing so?"

"At a near-capacity rate, since we entered the denser part of the cluster." *Jaccavrie* shifted to primness. "If you'd been less immersed in discussions with the Kirkasanter navigation officer, you might have got running reports from me."

"Destruction!" Laure swore. "I was studying her notes from their trip outbound, trying to get some idea of what configuration to look for, once we've learned how to make allowances for what this material does to starlight—Never mind. We'll have our conference right now, just as you requested. What'd you mean by 'an illusion'?"

"The view outside," answered the computer. "The concentration of mass is not really as many atoms per cubic centimeter as would be found in a vaporous planetary atmosphere. It is only that, across light-years, their absorption and reflection effects are cumulative. The gas and dust do, indeed, swirl, but not with anything like the velocity we think we perceive. That is due to our being under hyperdrive. Even at the very low pseudospeed at which we are feeling our way, we pass swiftly through varying densities. Space itself is not actually shining; excited atoms are fluorescing. Nor does space roar at you. What you hear is the sound of radiation counters and other instruments which I've activated. There are no real, tangible currents working on our hull, making it quiver. But when we make quantum microjumps across strong interstellar magnetic fields, and those fields vary according to an extraordinarily complex pattern, we're bound to interact noticeably with them.

"Admittedly the stars are far thicker than appears. My instruments can detect none beyond a few parsecs. But what data I've gathered of late leads me to suspect the estimate of a quarter million total is conservative. To be sure, most are dwarfs—"

"Come off that!" Laure barked. "I don't need you to explain what I knew the minute I saw this place."

"You need to be drawn out of your fantasizing," *Jaccavrie* said. "Though you recognize your daydreams for what they are, you can't afford them. Not now."

Laure tensed. He wanted to order the view turned off, but checked himself, wondered if the robot followed that chain of his impulses too, and said in a harshened voice: "When you go academic on me like that, it means you're postponing news you don't want to give me. We have troubles."

"We can soon have them, at any rate," *Jaccavrie* said. "My advice is to turn back at once."

"We can't navigate," Laure deduced. Though it was not unexpected, he nonetheless felt smitten.

"No. That is, I'm having difficulties already, and conditions ahead of us are demonstrably worse."

"What's the matter?"

"Optical methods are quite unsuitable. We knew that from the experience of the Kirkasanters. But nothing else works, either. You recall, you and I discussed the possibility of identifying supergiant stars through the clouds and using them for beacons. Though their light be diffused and absorbed, they should produce other effects—they should be powerful neutrino sources, for instance—that we could use."

"Don't they?"

"Oh, yes. But the effects are soon smothered. Too much else is going on. Too many neutrinos from too many different sources, to name one thing. Too many magnetic effects. The stars are so close together, you see; and so many of them are double, triple, quadruple, hence revolving rapidly and twisting the force lines; and irradiation keeps a goodly fraction of the interstellar medium in the plasma state. Thus we get electromagnetic action of every sort, plus synchrotron and betatron radiation, plus nuclear collisions, plus—"

"Spare me the complete list," Laure broke in. "Just say the noise level is too high for your instruments."

"And for any instruments that I can extrapolate as buildable," *Jaccavrie* replied. "The precision their filters would require seems greater than the laws of atomistics would allow."

"What about your inertial system? Bollixed up, too?"

"It's beginning to be. That's why I asked you to come take a good look at what's around us and what we're headed into, while you listen to my report." The robot was not built to know fear, but Laure wondered if she didn't spring back to pedantry as a refuge: "Inertial navigation would work here at kinetic velocities. But we can't traverse parsecs except hyperdrive. Inertial and gravitational mass being identical, too rapid a change of gravitational potential will tend to cause uncontrollable precession and nutation. We can compensate for that in normal parts of space. But not here. With so many stars so closely packed, moving among each other on paths too complex for me to calculate, the variation rate is becoming too much."

"In short," Laure said slowly, "if we go deeper into this stuff, we'll be flying blind."

"Yes. Just as *Makt* did."

"We can get out into clear space any time, can't we? You can follow a more or less straight line till we emerge."

"True. I don't like the hazards. The cosmic ray background is increasing considerably."

"You have screen fields."

"But I'm considering the implications. Those particles have to originate somewhere. Magnetic acceleration will only account for a fraction of their intensity. Hence the rate of nova production in this cluster, and of supernovae in the recent past, must be enormous. This in turn indicates vast numbers of lesser bodies—neutron stars, rogue planets, large meteoroids, thick dust banks—things that might be undetectable before we blunder into them."

Laure smiled at her unseen scanner. "If anything goes wrong, you'll react fast," he said. "You always do."

"I can't guarantee we won't run into trouble I can't deal with."

"Can you estimate the odds on that for me?"

Jaccavrie was silent. The air sputtered and sibilated. Laure found his vision drowning in the starfog. He needed a minute to realize he had not been answered. "Well?" he said.

"The parameters are too uncertain." Overtones had departed from her voice. "I can merely say that the probability of disaster is high in comparison to the value for travel through normal regions of the galaxy."

"Oh, for chaos' sake!" Laure's laugh was uneasy. "That figure is almost too small to measure. We knew before we entered this nebula that we'd be taking a risk. Now what about coherent radiation from natural sources?"

"My judgment is that the risk is out of proportion to the gain," *Jaccavrie* said. "At best, this is a place for scientific study. You've other work to do. Your basic—and dangerous—fantasy is that you can satisfy the emotional cravings of a few semibarbarians."

Anger sprang up in Laure. He gave it cold shape: "My order was that you report on coherent radiation."

Never before had he pulled the rank of his humanness on her.

She said like dead metal: "I have detected some in the visible and short infrared, where certain types of star excite pseudoquasar processes in the surrounding gas. It is dissipated as fast as any other light."

"The radio bands are clear?"

"Yes, of that type of wave, although—"

"Enough. We'll proceed as before, toward the center of the cluster. Cut this view and connect me with *Makt*."

The hazy suns vanished. Laure was alone in a metal compartment. He took a seat and glowered at the outercom screen before him. What had gotten into *Jaccavrie*, anyway? She'd been making her disapproval of this quest more and more obvious over the last few days. She wanted him to turn around, report to HQ, and leave the Kirkasanters there for whatever they might be able to make of themselves in a lifetime's exile. Well . . . her judgments were always conditioned by the fact that she was a Ranger vessel, built for Ranger work. But couldn't she see that his duty, as well as his desire, was to help Graydal's people?

The screen flickered. The two ships were so differently designed that it was hard for them to stay in phase for any considerable time, and thus hard to receive the modulation imposed on space-pulses. After a while the image steadied to show a face. "I'll switch you to Captain Demring," the communications officer said at once. In his folk, such lack of ceremony was as revealing of strain as haggardness and dark-rimmed eyes.

The image wavered again and became the Old Man's. He was in his cabin, which had direct audiovisual connections, and the background struck Laure anew with outlandishness. What history had brought forth the artistic conventions of that bright-colored, angular-figured tapestry? What song was being sung on the player, in what language, and on what scale? What was the symbolism behind the silver mask on the door?

Worn but indomitable, Demring looked forth and said, "Peace between us. What occasions this call?"

"You should know what I've learned," Laure said. "Uh, can we make this a three-way with your navigator?"

"Why?" The question was machine steady.

"Well, that is, her duties—"

"She is to help carry out decisions," Demring said. "She does not make them. At maximum, she can offer advice in discussion." He waited before adding, with a thrust: "And you have been having a great deal of discussion already with my daughter, Ranger Laure."

"No . . . I mean, yes, but—" The younger man rallied. He did have psych training to call upon, although its use had not yet become reflexive in him. "Captain," he said, "Graydal has been helping me

understand your ethos. Our two cultures have to see what each other's basics are if they're to cooperate, and that process begins right here, among these ships. Graydal can make things clearer to me, and I believe grasps my intent better, than anyone else of your crew."

"Why is that?" Demring demanded.

Laure suppressed pique at his arrogance—he was her father—and attempted a smile. "Well, sir, we've gotten acquainted to a degree, she and I. We can drop formality and just be friends."

"That is not necessarily desirable," Demring said.

Laure recollected that, throughout the human species, sexual customs are among the most variable. And the most emotionally charged. He put himself inside Demring's prejudices and said with what he hoped was the right slight note of indignation: "I assure you nothing inproper has occurred."

"No, no." The Kirkasanter made a brusque, chopping gesture. "I trust her. And you, I am sure. Yet I must warn that close ties between members of radically different societies can prove disastrous to everyone involved."

Laure might have sympathized as he thought, *He's afraid to let down his mask—is that why their art uses the motif so much?—but underneath, he is a father worrying about his little girl.* He felt too harassed. First his computer, now this! He said coolly, "I don't believe our cultures are that alien. They're both rational-technological, which is a tremendous similarity to begin with. But haven't we got off the subject? I wanted you to hear the findings this ship has made."

Demring relaxed. The unhuman universe he could cope with. "Proceed at will, Ranger."

When he had heard Laure out, though, he scowled, tugged his beard, and said without trying to hide distress: "Thus we have no chance of finding Kirkasant by ourselves."

"Evidently not," Laure said. "I'd hoped that one of my modern locator systems would work in this cluster. If so, we could have zigzagged rapidly between the stars, mapping them, and had a fair likelihood of finding the group you know within months. But as matters stand, we can't establish an accurate enough grid, and we have nothing to tie any such grid to. Once a given star disappears in the fog, we can't find it again. Not even by straight-line backtracking, because we don't have the navigational feedback to keep on a truly straight line."

"Lost." Demring stared down at his hands, clenched on the desk before him. When he looked up again, the bronze face was rigid with pain. "I was afraid of this," he said. "It is why I was reluctant to come back at all. I feared the effect of disappointment on my crew. By now you must know one major respect in which we differ from you. To us, home, kinfolk, ancestral graves are not mere pleasures. They are an important part of our identities. We are prepared to explore and colonize, but not to be totally cut off." He straightened in his seat and turned the confession into a strategic datum by finishing dry-voiced: "Therefore, the sooner we leave this degree of familiarity behind us and accept with physical renunciation the truth of what has happened to us—the sooner we get out of this cluster—the better for us."

"No," Laure said. "I've given a lot of thought to your situation. There *are* ways to navigate here."

Demring did not show surprise. He, too, must have dwelt on contingencies and possibilities. Laure sketched them nevertheless:

"Starting from outside the cluster, we can establish a grid of artificial beacons. I'd guess fifty thousand, in orbit around selected stars, would do. If each has its distinctive identifying signal, a spaceship can locate herself and lay a course. I can imagine several ways to make them. You want them to emit something that isn't swamped by natural noise. Hyperdrive drones, shuttling automatically back and forth, would be detectable in a light-year's radius. Coherent radio broadcasters on the right bands should be detectable at the same distance or better. Since the stars hereabouts are only light-weeks or light-months apart, an electromagnetic network wouldn't take long to complete its linkups. No doubt a real engineer, turned loose on the problem, would find better answers than these."

"I know," Demring said. "We on *Makt* have discussed the matter and reached similar conclusions. The basic obstacle is the work involved, first in producing that number of beacons, then—more significantly—in planting them. Many man-years, much shipping, must go to that task, if it is to be accomplished in a reasonable time."

"Yes."

"I like to think," said Demring, "that the clans of Hobrok would not haggle over who was to pay the cost. But I have talked with men on Serieve. I have taken heed of what Graydal does and does not relay of her conversations with you. Yours is a mercantile civilization."

"Not exactly," Laure said. "I've tried to explain—"

"Don't bother. We shall have the rest of our lives to learn about

your Commonalty. Shall we turn about, now, and end this expedition?"

Laure winced at the scorn but shook his head. "No, best we continue. We can make extraordinary findings here. Things that'll attract scientists. And with a lot of ships buzzing around—"

Demring's smile had no humor. "Spare me, Ranger. There will never be that many scientists come avisiting. And they will never plant beacons throughout the cluster. Why should they? The chance of one of their vessels stumbling on Kirkasant is negligible. They will be after unusual stars and planets, information on magnetic fields and plasmas and whatever else is readily studied. Not even the anthropologists will have any strong impetus to search out our world. They have many others to work on, equally strange to them, far more accessible."

"I have my own obligations," Laure said. "It was a long trip here. Having made it, I should recoup some of the cost to my organization by gathering as much data as I can before turning home."

"No matter the cost to my people?" Demring said slowly. "That they see their own sky around them, but nonetheless are exiles—for weeks longer?"

Laure lost his patience. "Withdraw if you like, Captain," he snapped. "I've no authority to stop you. But I'm going on. To the middle of the cluster, in fact."

Demring retorted in a cold flare: "Do you hope to find something that will make you personally rich, or only personally famous?" He reined himself in at once. "This is no place for impulsive acts. Your vessel is undoubtedly superior to mine. I am not certain, either, that *Makt's* navigational equipment is equal to finding that advanced base where we must refuel her. If you continue, I am bound in simple prudence to accompany you, unless the risks you take become gross. But I urge that we confer again."

"Any time, Captain." Laure cut his circuit.

He sat then, for a while, fuming. The culture barrier couldn't be that high. Could it? Surely the Kirkasanters were neither so stupid nor so perverse as not to see what he was trying to do for them. Or were they? Or was it his fault? He'd concentrated more on learning about them than on teaching them about him. Still, Graydal, at least, should know him by now.

The ship sensed an incoming call and turned Laure's screen back

on. And there she was. Gladness lifted in him until he saw her expression.

She said without greeting, winter in the golden gaze: "We officers have just been given a playback of your conversation with my father. What is your" (outphasing occurred, making the image into turbulence, filling the voice with staticlike ugliness, but he thought he recognized) "intention?" The screen blanked.

"Maintain contact," Laure told *Jaccavrie*.

"Not easy, in these gravitic fields," the ship said.

Laure jumped to his feet, cracked fist in palm, and shouted, "Is everything trying to brew trouble for me? Bring her back or so help me, I'll scrap you!"

He got a picture again, though it was blurred and wavery and the voice was streaked with buzzes and whines, as if he called to Graydal across light-years of swallowing starfog. She said—was it a little more kindly?—"We're puzzled. I was deputed to inquire further, since I am most . . . familiar . . . with you. If our two craft can't find Kirkasant by themselves, why are we going on?"

Laure understood her so well, after the watches when they talked, dined, drank, played music, laughed together, that he saw the misery behind her armor. For her people—for herself—this journey among mists was crueler than it would have been for him had he originated here. He belonged to a civilization of travelers; to him, no one planet could be the land of lost content. But in them would always stand a certain ridge purple against sunset, marsh at dawn, ice cloud walking over wind-gnawed desert crags, ancient castle, wingbeat in heaven . . . and always, always, the dear bright nights that no other place in man's universe knew.

They were a warrior folk. They would not settle down to be pitied; they would forge something powerful for themselves in their exile. But he was not helping them forget their uprootedness.

Thus he almost gave her his true reason. He halted in time and, instead, explained in more detail what he had told Captain Demring. His ship represented a considerable investment, to be amortized over her service life. Likewise, with his training, did he. The time he had spent coming hither was, therefore, equivalent to a large sum of money. And to date, he had nothing to show for that expense except confirmation of a fairly obvious guess about the nature of Kirkasant's surroundings.

He had broad discretion—while he was in service. But he could be discharged. He would be, if his career, taken as a whole, didn't seem

to be returning a profit. In this particular case, the profit would consist of detailed information about a unique environment. You could prorate that in such terms as: scientific knowledge, with its potentialities for technological progress; spacefaring experience; public relations—

Graydal regarded him in a kind of horror. "You cannot mean . . . we go on . . . merely to further your private ends," she whispered. Interference gibed at them both.

"No!" Laure protested. "Look, only look, I want to help you. But you, too, have to justify yourselves economically. You're the reason I came so far in the first place. If you're to work with the Commonalty, and it's to help you make a fresh start, you have to show that that's worth the Commonalty's while. Here's where we start proving it. By going on. Eventually, by bringing them a bookful of knowledge they didn't have before."

Her gaze upon him calmed but remained aloof. "Do you think that is right?"

"It's the way things are, anyhow," he said. "Sometimes I wonder if my attempts to explain my people to your haven't glided right off your brain."

"You have made it clear that they think of nothing but their own good," she said thinly.

"If so, I've failed to make anything clear." Laure slumped in his chair web. Some days hit a man with one club after the next. He forced himself to sit erect again and say:

"We have a different ideal from you. Or no, that's not correct. We have the same set of ideals. The emphases are different. You believe the individual ought to be free and ought to help his fellowman. We do, too. But you make the service basic, you give it priority. We have the opposite way. You give a man, or a woman, duties to the clan and the country from birth. But you protect his individuality by frowning on slavishness and on anyone who doesn't keep a strictly private side to his life. We give a person freedom, within a loose framework of common-sense prohibitions. And then we protect his social aspect by frowning on greed, selfishness, callousness."

"I know," she said. "You have—"

"But maybe you haven't thought how we *must* do it that way," he pleaded. "Civilization's gotten too big out there for anything but freedom to work. The Commonalty isn't a government. How would you govern ten million planets? It's a private, voluntary, mutual-benefit society, open to anyone anywhere who meets the modest

standards. It maintains certain services for its members, like my own space rescue work. The services are widespread and efficient enough that local planetary governments also like to hire them. But I don't speak for my civilization. Nobody does. You've made a friend of me. But how do you make friends with ten million times a billion individuals?

"You've told me before," she said.

And it didn't register. Not really. Too new an idea for you, I suppose, Laure thought. He ignored her remark and went on:

"In the same way, we can't have a planned interstellar economy. Planning breaks down under the sheer mass of detail when it's attempted for a single continent. History is full of cases. So we rely on the market, which operates as automatically as gravitation. Also as efficiently, as impersonally, and sometimes as ruthlessly—but we didn't make this universe. We only live in it."

He reached out his hands, as if to touch her through the distance and the distortion. "Can't you see? I'm not able to help your plight. Nobody is. No individual quadrillionaire, no foundation, no government, no consortium could pay the cost of finding your home for you. It's not a matter of lacking charity. It's a matter of lacking resources for that magnitude of effort. The resources are divided among too many people, each of whom has his own obligations to meet first.

"Certainly, if each would contribute a pittance, you could buy your fleet. But the tax mechanism for collecting that pittance doesn't exist and can't be made to exist. As for free-will donations—how do we get your message across to an entire civilization, that big, that diverse, that busy with its own affairs?—which include cases of need far more urgent than yours.

"Graydal, we're not greedy where I come from. We're helpless."

She studied him at length. He wondered, but could not see through the ripplings, what emotions passed across her face. Finally she spoke, not altogether ungently, though helmeted again in the reserve of her kindred, and he could not hear anything of it through the buzzings except: ". . . proceed, since we must. For a while, anyhow. Good watch, Ranger."

The screen blanked. This time he couldn't make the ship repair the connection for him.

At the heart of the great cluster, where the nebula was so thick as to be a nearly featureless glow, pearl-hued and shot with rainbows, the

stars were themselves so close that thousands could be seen. The spaceships crept forward like frigates on unknown seas of ancient Earth. For here was more than fog; here were shoals, reefs, and riptides. Energies travailed in the plasma. Drifts of dust, loose planets, burnt-out suns lay in menace behind the denser clouds. Twice *Makt* would have met catastrophe had not *Jaccavrie* sensed the danger with keener instruments and cried a warning to sheer off.

After Demring's subsequent urgings had failed, Graydal came aboard in person to beg Laure that he turn homeward. That she should surrender her pride to such an extent bespoke how worn down she and her folk were. "What are we gaining worth the risk?" she asked shakenly.

"We're proving that this is a treasure house of absolutely unique phenomena," he answered. He was also hollowed, partly from the long travel and the now constant tension, partly from the half estrangement between him and her. He tried to put enthusiasm in his voice. "Once we've reported, expeditions are certain to be organized. I'll bet the foundations of two or three whole new sciences will get laid here."

"I know. Everything astronomical, in abundance, close together and interacting." Her shoulders drooped. "But our task isn't research. We can go back now, we could have gone back already, and carried enough details with us. Why do we not?"

"I want to investigate several planets yet, on the ground, in different systems," he told her. "Then we'll call a halt."

"What do they matter to you?"

"Well, local stellar spectra are freakish. I want to know if the element abundances in solid bodies correspond."

She stared at him. "I do not understand you," she said. "I thought I did, but I was wrong. You have no compassion. You led us, you lured us so far in that we can't escape without your ship for a guide. You don't care how tired and tormented we are. You can't, or won't, understand why we are anxious to live."

"I am myself," he tried to grin. "I enjoy the process."

The dark head shook. "I said you won't understand. We do not fear death for ourselves. But most of us have not yet had children. We do fear death for our bloodlines. We *need* to find a home, forgetting Kirkasant, and begin our families. You, though, you keep us on this barren search—why? For your own glory?"

He should have explained then. But the strain and weariness in

him snapped: "You accepted my leadership. That makes me responsible for you, and I can't be responsible if I don't have command. You can endure another couple of weeks. That's all it'll take."

And she should have answered that she knew his motives were good and wished simply to hear his reasons. But being the descendant of hunters and soldiers, she clicked heels together and flung back at him: "Very well, Ranger. I shall convey your word to my captain."

She left, and did not again board *Jaccavrie*.

Later, after a sleepless "night," Laure said, "Put me through to *Makt's* navigator."

"I wouldn't advise that," said the woman-voice of his ship.

"Why not?"

"I presume you want to make amends. Do you know how she—or her father, or her young male shipmates that must be attached to her—how they will react?" They are alien to you, and under intense strain."

"They're human!"

Engines pulsed. Ventilators whispered. "Well?" said Laure.

"I'm not designed to compute about emotions, except on an elementary level," *Jaccavrie* said. "But please recollect the diversity of mankind. On Reith, for example, ordinary peaceful men can fall into literally murderous rages. It happens so often that violence under those circumstances is not a crime in their law. A Talatto will be patient and cheerful in adversity, up to a certain point: after which he quits striving, contemplates his God, and waits to die. You can think of other cultures. And they are within the ambience of the Commonalty. How foreign might not the Kirkasanters be?"

"Um-m-m—"

"I suggest you obtrude your presence on them as little as possible. That makes for the smallest probability of provoking some unforseeable outburst. Once our task is completed, once we are bound home, the stress will be removed and you can safely behave toward them as you like."

"Well . . . you may be right." Laure stared dull-eyed at a bulkhead. "I don't know. I just don't know."

Before long, he was too busy to fret much. *Jaccavrie* went at his direction, finding planetary systems that belonged to various stellar types. In each, he landed on an airless body, took analytical readings

and mineral samples, and gave larger worlds a cursory inspection from a distance.

He did not find life. Not anywhere. He had expected that. In fact, he was confirming his whole guess about the inmost part of the cluster.

Here gravitation had concentrated dust and gas till the rate of star production became unbelievable. Each time the cluster passed through the clouds around galactic center and took on a new load of material, there must have been a spate of supernovae, several per century for a million years or more. He could not visualize what fury had raged; he scarcely dared put his estimate in numbers. Probably radiation had sterilized every abode of life for fifty light-years around. (Kirkasant must, therefore, lie farther out—which fitted in with what he had been told, that the interstellar medium was much denser in this core region than in the neighborhood of the vanished world.)

Nuclei had been cooked in stellar interiors, not the two, three, four star-generations which have preceded the majority of the normal galaxy—here, a typical atom might well have gone through a dozen successive supernova explosions. Transformation built on transformation. Hydrogen and helium remained the commonest elements, but only because of overwhelming initial abundance. Otherwise the lighter substances had mostly become rare. Planets were like nothing ever known before. Giant ones did not have thick shells of frozen water, nor did smaller ones have extensive silicate crusts. Carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, sodium, aluminum, calcium were all but lost among . . . iron, gold, mercury, tungsten, bismuth, uranium and transuranics—On some little spheres Laure dared not land. They radiated too fiercely. A heavily armored robot might someday set foot on them, but never a living organism.

The crew of *Makt* didn't offer to help him. Irrational in his hurt, he didn't ask them. *Jaccavrie* could carry on any essential communications with their captain and navigator. He toiled until he dropped, woke, fueled his body, and went back to work. Between stars, he made detailed analyses of his samples. That was tricky enough to keep his mind off Graydal. Minerals like these could have formed nowhere but in this witchy realm.

Finally the ships took orbit around a planet that had atmosphere. "Do you indeed wish to make entry there?" the computer asked. "I would not recommend it."

"You never recommend anything I want to do," Laure grunted. "I

know air adds an extra factor to reckon with. But I want to get some idea of element distribution at the surface of objects like that." He rubbed bloodshot eyes. "It'll be the last. Then we go home."

"As you wish." Did the artificial voice actually sigh? "But after this long a time in space, you'll have to batten things down for an aerodynamic landing."

"No, I won't. I'm taking the sled as usual. You'll stay put."

"You are being reckless. This isn't an airless globe where I can orbit right above the mountaintops and see everything that might happen to you. Why, if I haven't misgauged, the ionosphere is so charged that the sled radio can't reach me."

"Nothing's likely to go wrong," Laure said. "But should it, you can't be spared. The Kirkasanters need you to conduct them safely out."

"I—"

"You heard your orders." Laure proceeded to discuss certain basic precautions. Not that he felt they were necessary. His objective looked peaceful—dry, sterile, a stone spinning around a star.

Nevertheless, when he departed the main hatch and gunned his gravity sled to kill velocity, the view caught at his breath.

Around him reached the shining fog. Stars and stars were caught in it, illuminating caverns and tendrils, aureoled with many-colored flourescences. Even as he looked, one such point, steely blue, multiplied its brilliance until the intensity hurt his eyes. Another nova. Every state of stellar evolution was so richly represented that it was as if time itself had been compressed—cosmos, what an astrophysical laboratory!

(For unmanned instruments, as a general rule. Human flesh couldn't stand many months in a stretch of the cosmic radiation that sleeted through these spaces, the synchrotron and betatron and Cerenkov quanta that boiled from particles hurled in the gas across the intertwining magnetism of atoms and suns. Laure kept glancing at the cumulative exposure meter on his left wrist.)

The solar disk was large and lurid orange. Despite thermostating in the sled, Laure felt its heat strike at him through the bubble and his own armor. A stepdown viewer revealed immense prominences licking flame-tongues across the sky, and a heartstoppingly beautiful corona. A Type K shouldn't be that spectacular, but there were no normal stars in signt—not with this element distribution and infall.

Once the planet he was approaching had been farther out. But

friction with the nebula, over gigayears, was causing it to spiral inward. Surface temperature wasn't yet excessive, about 50° C., because the atmosphere was thin, mainly noble gases. The entire world hadn't sufficient water to fill a decent lake. It rolled before him as a gloom little relieved by the reddish blots of gigantic dust storms. Refracted light made its air a fiery ring.

His sled struck that atmosphere, and for a while he was busy amidst thunder and shudder, helping the autopilot bring the small craft down. In the end, he hovered above a jumbled plain. Mountains bulked bare on the near horizon. The rock was black and brown and darkly gleaming. The sun stood high in a deep purple heaven. He checked with an induction probe, confirmed that the ground was solid—in fact, incredibly hard—and landed.

When he stepped out, weight caught at him. The planet had less diameter than the least of those on which men live, but was so dense that gravity stood at 1.22 standard G. An unexpectedly strong wind shoved at him. Though thin, the air was moving fast. He heard it wail through his helmet. From afar came a rumble, and a quiver entered his boots and bones. Landslide? Earthquake? Unseen volcano? He didn't know what was or was not possible here. Nor, he suspected, did the most expert planetologist. Worlds like this had not hitherto been trodden.

Radiation from the ground was higher than he liked. Better do his job quickly. He lugged forth apparatus. A power drill for samples—he set it up and let it work while he assembled a pyroanalyzer and fed it a rock picked off the chaotic terrain. Crumbled between alloy jaws, flash heated to vapor, the mineral gave up its fundamental composition to the optical and mass spectrographs. Laure studied the printout and nodded in satisfaction. The presence of atmosphere hadn't changed matters. This place was loaded with heavy metals and radioactives. He'd need a picture of molecular and crystalline structures before being certain that they were as easily extractable as he'd found them to be on the other planets; but he had no reason to doubt it.

Well, he thought, aware of hunger and aching feet, *let's relax awhile in the cab, catch a meal and a nap, then go check a few other spots, just to make sure they're equally promising; and then–*

The sky exploded.

He was on his belly, faceplate buried in arms against that flash, before his conscious mind knew what had happened. Rangers learn about

nuclear weapons. When, after a minute, no shock wave had hit him, no sound other than a rising wind, he dared sit up and look.

The sky had turned white. The sun was no longer like an orange lantern but molten brass. He couldn't squint anywhere near it. Radiance crowded upon him, heat mounted even as he climbed erect. *Nova,* he thought in his rocking reality, and caught Graydal to him for the moment he was to become a wisp of gas.

But he remained alive, alone, on a plain that now shimmered with light and mirage. The wind screamed louder still. He felt how it pushed him, and how the mass of the planet pulled, and how his mouth was dry and his muscles tautened for a leap. The brilliance pained his eyes, but was not unendurable behind a self-adapting faceplate and did not seem to be growing greater. The infrared brought forth sweat on his skin, but he was not being baked.

Steadiness came. Something almighty strange was happening. It hadn't killed him yet, though. As a check, with no hope of making contact, he tuned his radio. Static brawled in his earplugs.

His heart thudded. He couldn't tell whether he was afraid or exhilarated. He was, after all, quite a young man. But his coolness of his training came upon him. He didn't stop feeling. Wildness churned beneath self-control. But he did methodically begin to collect his equipment, and to reason while he acted.

Not a nova burst. Main sequence stars don't go nova. They don't vary in seconds, either . . . but then, every star around here is abnormal. Perhaps, if I'd checked the spectrum of this one, I'd have seen indications that it was about to move into another phase of a jagged output cycle. Or perhaps I wouldn't have known what the indications meant. Who's studied astrophysics in circumstances like these?

What had occurred might be akin to the Wolf-Rayet phenomenon, he thought. The stars around him did not evolve along ordinary lines. They had strange compositions to start with. And then matter kept falling into them, changing that composition, increasing their masses. That must produce instability. Each spectrum he had taken in this heart of the cluster showed enormous turbulence in the surface layers. So did the spots, flares, prominences, coronas he had seen. Well, the turbulence evidently went deeper than the photospheres. Actual stellar cores and their nuclear furnaces might be affected. Probably every local sun was a violent variable.

Even in the less dense regions, stars must have peculiar careers.

The sun of Kirkasant had apparently been stable for five thousand years—or several million, more likely, since the planet had well-developed native life. But who could swear it would stay thus? Destruction! The place had to be found, had to, so that the people could be evacuated if need arose. You can't let little children fry—

Laure checked his radiation meter. The needle climbed ominously fast up the dial. Yonder sun was spitting X rays, in appreciable quantity, and the planet had no ozone layer to block them. He'd be dead if he didn't get to shelter—for choice, his ship and her forcescreens—before the ions arrived. Despite its density, the globe had no magnetic field to speak of, either, to ward them off. Probably the core was made of stuff like osmium and uranium. Such a weird blend might well be solid rather than molten. *I don't know about that. I do know I'd better get my tail out of here.*

The wind yelled. It began driving ferrous dust against him, borne from somewhere else. He saw the particles scud in darkling whirls and heard them click on his helmet. Doggedly, he finished loading his gear. When at last he entered the sled cab and shut the air lock, his vehicle was trembling under the blast and the sun was reddened and dimmed by haze.

He started the motor and lifted. No sense in resisting the wind. He was quite happy to be blown toward the night side. Meanwhile he'd gain altitude, then get above the storm, collect orbital velocity and—

He never knew what happened. The sled was supposedly able to ride out more vicious blows than any this world could produce. But who could foretell what this world was capable of? The atmosphere, being thin, developed high velocities. Perhaps the sudden increased irradiation had triggered paroxysm in a cyclone cell. Perhaps the dust, which was conductive, transferred energy into such a vortex at a greater rate than one might believe. Laure wasn't concerned about meteorological theory.

He was concerned with staying alive, when an instant blindness clamped down upon him with a shriek that nigh tore the top off his skull, and he was whirled like a leaf and cast against a mountainside.

The event was too fast for awareness, for anything but reaction. His autopilot and he must somehow have got some control. The crash ruined the sled, ripped open its belly, scattered its cargo, but did not crumple the cab section. Shock harness kept the man from serious injury. He was momentarily unconscious, but came back with no worse than an aching body and blood in his mouth.

Wind hooted. Dust went hissing and scouring. The sun was a dim red disk, though from time to time a beam of pure fire struck through the storm and blazed off metallic cliffsides.

Laure fumbled with his harness and stumbled out. Half seen, the slope on which he stood caught at his feet with cragginess. He had to take cover. The beta particles would arrive at any moment, the protons within hours, and they bore his death.

He was dismayed to learn the stowed equipment was gone. He dared not search for it. Instead, he made his clumsy way into the murk.

He found no cave—not in this waterless land—but by peering and calculating (odd how calm you can grow when your life depends on your brain) he discovered in what direction his chances were best, and was rewarded. A onetime landslide had piled great slabs of rock on each other. Among them was a passage into which he could crawl.

Then nothing to do but lie in that narrow space and wait.

Light seeped around a bend, with the noise of the storm. He could judge thereby how matters went outside. Periodically he crept to the entrance of his dolmen and monitored the radiation level. Before long it had reached such a count that—space armor, expert therapy, and all—an hour's exposure would kill him.

He must wait.

Jaccavrie knew the approximate area where he intended to set down. She'd come looking as soon as possible. Flitting low, using her detectors, she'd find the wrecked sled. More than that she could not do unaided. But he could emerge and call her. Whether or not they actually saw each other in this mountainscape, he could emit a radio signal for her to home on. She'd hover, snatch him with a forcebeam, and reel him in.

But . . . this depended on calm weather. *Jaccavrie* could overmaster any wind. But the dust would blind both her and him. And deafen and mute them; it was conductive, radio could not get through. Laure proved that to his own satisfaction by experimenting with the miniradar built into his armor.

So everything seemed to depend on which came first, the end of the gale or the end of Laure's powerpack. His air renewer drew on it. About thirty hours' worth of charge remained before he choked on his own breath. If only he'd been able to grab a spare accumulator or two, or better still, a hand-cranked recharger! They might have rolled no more than ten meters off. But he had decided not to search the area. And by now, he couldn't go back. Not through the radiation.

He sighed, drank a bit from his water nipple, ate a bit through his chow lock, wished for a glass of beer and a comfortable bed, and went to sleep.

When he awoke, the wind had dropped from a full to a half gale; but the dust drift was so heavy as to conceal the glorious starfog night that had fallen. It screened off some of the radiation, too, though not enough to do him any good. He puzzled over why the body of the planet wasn't helping more. Finally he decided that ions, hitting the upper air along the terminator, produced secondaries and cascades which descended everywhere.

The day-side bombardment must really have got fierce!

Twenty hours left. He opened the life-support box he had taken off his shoulder rack, pulled out the sanitary unit, and attached it. Men don't die romantically, like characters on a stage. Their bodies are too stubborn.

So are their minds. He should have been putting his thoughts in order, but he kept being disturbed by recollections of his parents, of Graydal, of a funny little tavern he'd once visited, of a gaucherie he'd rather forget, of some money owing to him, of Graydal—He ate again, and drowsed again, and the wind filled the air outside with dust, and time closed in like a hand.

Ten hours left. No more?

Five. Already?

What a stupid way to end. Fear fluttered at the edge of his perception. He beat it off. The wind yammered. How long can a dust storm continue, anyhow? Where'd it come from? Daylight again, outside his refuge, colored like blood and brass. The charged particles and X rays were so thick that some diffused in to him. He shifted cramped muscles, and drank the stench of his unwashed skin, and regretted everything he had wanted and failed to do.

A shadow cast on the cornering rock. A rustle and slither conducted to his ears. A form, bulky and awkward as his own, crawling around the tunnel bend. Numb, shattered, he switched on his radio. The air was fairly clear in here and he heard her voice through the static: ". . . you are, you are alive! Oh, Valfar's Wings upbear us, you live!"

He held her while she sobbed and he wept, too. "You shouldn't have," he stammered. "I never meant for *you* to risk yourself—"

"We dared not wait," she said when they were calmer. "We saw, from space, that the storm was enormous. It would go on in this area for days. And we didn't know how long you had to live. We only knew

you were in trouble, or you'd have been back with us. We came down. I almost had to fight my father, but I won and came. The hazard wasn't so great for me. Really, no, believe me. She protected me till we found your sled. Then I did have to go out afoot with a metal detector to find you. Because you were obviously sheltered somewhere, and so you could only be detected at closer range than she can come. But the danger wasn't that great, Daven. I can stand much more radiation than you. I'm still well inside my tolerance, won't even need any drugs. Now I'll shoot off this flare, and she'll see, and come so close that we can make a dash—You are all right, aren't you? You swear it?"

"Oh, yes," he said slowly. "I'm fine. Better off than ever in my life." Absurdly, he had to have the answer, however footling all questions were against the fact that she had come after him and was here and they were both alive. "We? Who's your companion?"

She laughed and clinked her faceplate against his. "*Jacavrie*, of course. Who else? You didn't think your womenfolk were about to leave you alone, did you?"

The ships began their trek homeward. They moved without haste. Best to be cautious until they had emerged from the nebula, seen where they were, and aimed themselves at the Dragon's Head.

"My people and I are pleased at your safety," said Demring's image in the outercom screen. He spoke under the obligation to be courteous, and could not refrain from adding: "We also approve your decision not to investigate that planet further."

"For the first, thanks," Laure answered. "As for the second—" He shrugged. "No real need. I was curious about the effects of an atmosphere, but my computer has just run off a probability analysis of the data I already have, which proves that no more are necessary for my purposes."

"May one inquire what your purposes are?"

"I'd like to discuss that first with your navigator. In private."

The green gaze studied Laurs before Demring said, unsmiling: "You have the right of command. And by our customs, she having been instrumental in saving your life, a special relationship exists. But again I counsel forethought."

Laure paid no attention to that last sentence. His pulse was beating too gladly. He switched off as soon as possible and ordered the best dinner his ship could provide.

"Are you certain you want to make your annoucement through her?" the voice asked him. "And to her in this manner?"

"I am. I think I've earned the pleasure. Now I'm off to make myself presentable for the occasion. Carry on." Laure went whistling down the corridor.

But when Graydal boarded, he took both her hands and they looked long in silence at each other. She had strewn jewels in her tresses, turning them to a starred midnight. Her clothes were civilian, a deep blue that offset coppery skin, amber eyes, and suppleness. And did he catch the least woodsy fragrance of perfume?

"Welcome," was all he could say at last.

"I am so happy," she answered.

They went to the saloon and sat down on the couch together. Daiquiris were ready for them. They touched glasses. "Good voyage," he made the old toast, "and merry landing."

"For me, yes." Her smile faded. "And I hope for the rest. How I hope."

"Don't you think thy can get along in the ouside worlds?"

"Yes, undoubtedly." The incredible lashes fluttered. "But they will never be as fortunate as . . . as I think I may be."

"You have good prospects yourself?" The blood roared in his temples.

"I am not quite sure," she replied shyly.

He had intended to spin out his surprise at length, but suddenly he couldn't let her stay troubled, not to any degree. He cleared his throat and said, "I have news."

She tilted her head and waited with that relaxed alertness he liked to see. He wondered how foolish the grin was on his face. Attempting to recover dignity, he embarked on a roundabout introduction.

"You wondered why I insisted on exploring the cluster center, and in such detail. Probably I ought to have explained myself from the beginning. But I was afraid of raising false hopes. I'd no guarantee that things would turn out to be the way I'd guessed. Failure, I thought, would be too horrible for you, if you knew what success could mean. But I was working on your behalf, nothing else.

"You see, because my civilization is founded on individualism, it makes property rights quite basic. In particular, if there aren't any inhabitants or something like that, discoverers can claim ownership within extremely broad limits.

"Well, we . . . you . . . our expedition has met the requirements of

discovery as far as those planets are concerned. We've been there, we've proven what they're like, we've located them as well as might be without beacons—"

He saw how she struggled not to be too sanguine. "That isn't a true location," she said. "I can't imagine how we will ever lead anybody back to precisely those stars."

"Nor can I," he said. "And it doesn't matter. Because, well, we took an adequate sample. We can be sure now that practically every star in the cluster heart has planets that are made of heavy elements. So it isn't necessary, for their exploitation, to go to any particular system. In addition, we've learned about hazards and so forth, gotten information that'll be essential to other people. And therefore"—he chuckled—"I guess we can't file a claim on your entire Cloud Universe. But any court will award you . . . us . . . a fair share. Not specific planets, since they can't be found right away. Instead, a share of everything. Your crew will draw royalties on the richest mines in the galaxy. On millions of them."

She responded with thoughtfulness rather than enthusiasm. "Indeed? We did wonder, on *Makt*, if you might not be hoping to find abundant metals. But we decided that couldn't be. For why would anyone come here for them? Can they not be had more easily, closer to home?"

Slightly dashed, he said, "No. Especially when most worlds in this frontier are comparatively metal-poor. They do have some veins of ore, yes. And the colonists can extract anything from the oceans, as on Serieve. But there's a natural limit to such a process. In time, carried out on the scale that'd be required when population has grown . . . it'd be releasing so much heat that planetary temperature would be affected."

"That sounds farfetched."

"No. A simple calculation will prove it. According to historical records, Earth herself ran into the problem, and not terribly long after the industrial era began. However, quite aside from remote prospects, people will want to mine these cluster worlds immediately. True, it's a long haul, and operations will have to be totally automated. But the heavy elements that are rare elsewhere are so abundant here as to more than make up for those extra costs." He smiled. "I'm afraid you can't escape your fate. You're going to be . . . not wealthly. To call you 'wealthy' would be like calling a supernova 'luminous.' You'll command more resources than many whole civilizations have done."

Her look upon him remained grave. "You did this for us? You should not have. What use would riches be to us if we lost you?"

He remembered that he couldn't have expected her to carol about this. In her culture, money was not unwelcome, but neither was it an important goal. So what she had just said meant less than if a girl of the Commonalty had spoken. Nevertheless, joy kindled in him. She sensed that, laid her hand across his, and murmured, "But your thought was noble."

He couldn't restrain himself any longer. He laughed aloud. "Noble?" he cried. "I'd call it clever. Fiendishly clever. Don't you see? I've given you Kirkasant back!"

She gasped.

He jumped up and paced exuberant before her. "You could wait a few years till your cash reserves grow astronomical and buy as big a fleet as you want to search the cluster. But it isn't needful. When word gets out, the miners will come swarming. They'll plant beacons, they'll have to. The grid will be functioning within one year, I'll bet. As soon as you can navigate, identify where you are and where you've been, you can't help finding your home—in weeks!"

She joined him, then, casting herself into this arms, laughing and weeping. He had known of emotional depth in her, beneath the schooled reserve. But never before now had he found as much warmth as was hers.

Long, long afterward, air locks linked and she bade him good night. "Until tomorrow," she said.

"Many tomorrows, I hope."

"And I hope. I promise."

He watched the way she had gone until the locks closed again and the ships parted company. A little drunkenly, not with alcohol, he returned to the saloon for a nightcap.

"Turn off that color thing," he said. "Give me an outside view."

The ship obeyed. In the screen appeared stars, and the cloud from which stars were being born. "Her sky," Laure said. He flopped on to the couch and admired.

"I might as well start getting used to it," he said. "I expect I'll spend a lot of vacation time, at least, on Kirkasant."

"Daven," said *Jaccavrie*.

She was not in the habit of addressing him thus, and so gently. He started. "Yes?"

"I have been—" Silence hummed for a second. "I have been

wondering how to tell you. Any phrasing, any inflection, could strike you as something I computed to produce an effect. I am only a machine."

Though unease prickled him, he leaned forward to touch a bulkhead. It trembled a little with her engine energy. "And I, old girl," he said. "Or else you also are an organism. We're both people."

"Thank you," said the ship, almost too low to be heard.

Laure braced himself. "What did you have to tell me?"

She forgot about keeping her voice humanized. The words clipped forth: "I finished the chromosome analysis some time ago. Thereafter I tried to discourage certain tendencies I noticed in you. But now I have no way to avoid giving you the plain truth. They are not human on that planet."

"What?" he yelled. The glass slipped from his hand and splashed red wine across the deck. "You're crazy! Records, traditions, artifacts, appearance, behavior—"

The ship's voice came striding across his. "Yes, they are human descended. But their ancestors had to make an enormous adaptation. The loss of night vision is merely indicative. The fact that they can, for example, ingest heavy metals like arsenic unharmed might be interpreted as simple immunity. But you will recall that they find unarsenated food tasteless. Did that never suggest to you that they have developed a metabolic requirement for the element? And you should have drawn a conclusion from their high tolerance for ionizing radiation. It cannot be due to their having stronger proteins, can it? No, it must be because they have evolved a capacity for extremely rapid and error-free repair of chemical damage from that source. This in turn is another measure of how different their enzyme system is from yours.

"Now the enzymes, of course, are governed by the DNA of the cells, which is the molecule of heredity—"

"Stop," Laure said. His speech was as flat as hers. "I see what you're at. You are about to report that your chromosome study proved the matter. My kind of people and hers can't reproduce with each other."

"Correct," *Jaccavrie* said.

Laure shook himself, as if he were cold. He continued to look at the glowing fog. "You can't call them nonhuman on that account."

"A question of semantics. Hardly an important one. Except for the fact that Kirkasanters apparently are under an instinctual compulsion to have children."

"I know," Laure said.

And after a time: "Good thing, really. They're a high-class breed. We could use a lot of them."

"Your own genes are above average," *Jaccavrie* said.

"Maybe. What of it?"

Her voice turned alive again. "I'd like to have grandchildren," she said wistfully.

Laure laughed. "All right," he said. "No doubt one day you will." The laughter was somewhat of a victory.

The Worlds of Poul Anderson is a special publication of The Gregg Press Science Fiction Series, a major Publishing program offering authoritative quality editions of the best in science fiction. Edited by David G. Hartwell and L. W. Currey, the series includes many classic works of science fiction and fantasy that have never before been published in hardcover editions. For further information about The Gregg Press Science Fiction Series, please inquire at your SF bookstore or library or write to Gregg Press, 70 Lincoln Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02111

Other Works by Poul Anderson
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The People of the Wind (Gregg Press, 1977). With a New Introduction by Sandra Miesel. This novel is central to the development of Anderson's interstellar trader and future history series (also known at the Technic Civilization Series) which began in 1958 with *War of the Wing-Men*. Nominated for both the Hugo (1974) and Nebula (1973) Awards, this is the first hardcover edition of one of Anderson's major works.

War of the Wing-Men (Gregg Press, 1976). With New Introductions by Charles N. Brown and Sandra Miesel. Not only the first novel in Anderson's Technic Civilization Series, this is also his first attempt to create a complex planet to use as a background. The novel also introduces the character Nicholas Van Rijn, a fat, jovial, ruthless merchant prince, who uses all his cunning to get help for his fellow humans marooned on Diomedes, and in the process he incidentally ends a war and improves Diomedian civilization.

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Poul Anderson was born in Bristol, Pennsylvania and graduated from the University of Minnesota as a physics major (Gordon Dickson, another science fiction writer, was his roommate). He began publishing short stories shortly after graduation, and since then he has published more than 300 stories and 75 books, including nonfiction, historical novels, mysteries and children's books, as well as science fiction. His sensitivity to the cultural and philosophical implications of advanced technology and his mastery of narrative have made Anderson one of the most respected and widely read authors of science fiction and have earned him five Hugo and two Nebula [illegible] Poul Anderson lives and [illegible] wife Karen.

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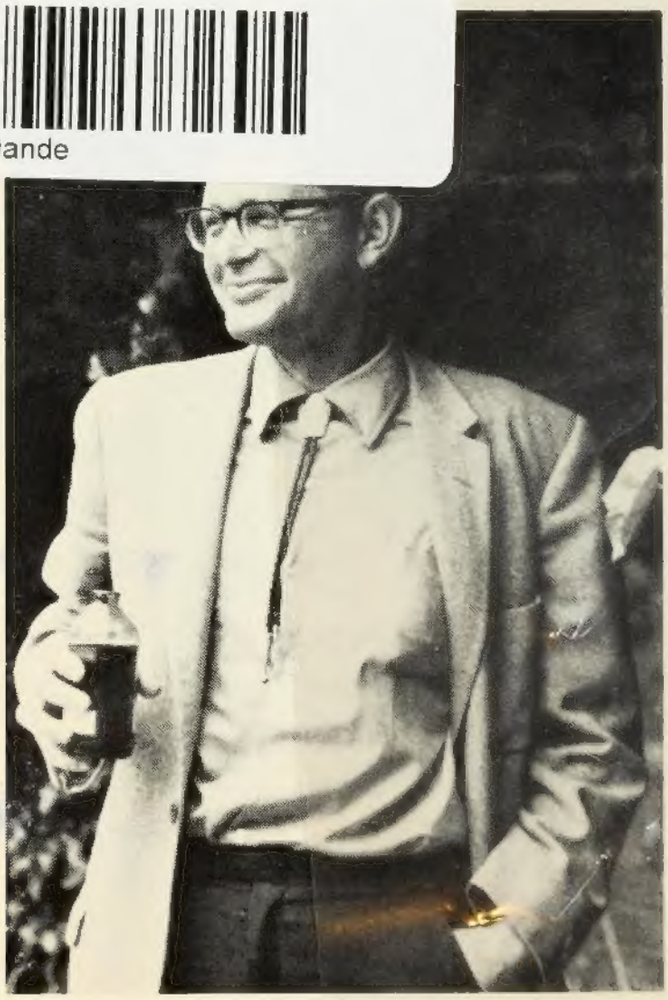

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